

Confusion Matrix in the Oceans

Conceptual semantics of the terms
"Indo-Pacific" and "minilateralism"



Contents

The U.S. Factor in Sino-India Relations in the Indian Ocean

Yen-Chiang Chang and Sumedh Anil Lokhande

03

Cover Story

9

Confusion Matrix in the Oceans

Introduction

Confusion Matrix in the Oceans

- i. Asia-Pacific vs Indo-Pacific: Choice of terminology and its strategic implications
- ii. Semantics and policy lexicon
- iii. A historical perspective -- from Chinese mariner Zheng He to present day
- iv. Who are the proponents of the Indo-Pacific narrative?

An Asia-Pacific framework for regional order

- i. Where is the epicenter of Asia-Pacific?
- ii. Unilateralism vs multilateralism vs minilateralism
- iii. Regional economic interdependence and emerging security dynamics

China's narrative on the "Indo-Pacific"

Conclusion



(Source: aa.com.tr)

The U.S. Factor in Sino-India Relations in the Indian Ocean

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About
the
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Today, the majority of both Chinese trade -- particularly oil, and India's trade are through the sea lanes of the Indian Ocean. Also, two-thirds of the world's oil trade and one-third of bulk cargo moves through this region.

India considers the Indian Ocean as its own lake and makes efforts to justify its legitimacy in these waters. On the other hand, increasing economic interests and the need to protect its sea lanes of communication in the region have necessitated China to strengthen its naval presence. Though the U.S. is the most significant power in the region, it has become increasingly self-centred, which, in turn, demands on India and other regional powers to commit more.

Traditionally, India and China used to be distant from each other's maritime domain. Since the dawn of the 21st century and with the growth of their respective naval power, the presence of the Indian Navy in China's waters and Chinese Navy in India's proximity has become a common practice. With the Sino-India economic linkages increasing, they have started to learn to accommodate each other in and near their own waters, but both countries still maintain some sort of scepticism about one another.

The U.S. is regarded as a dominant power in the Asia Pacific as well as the Indian Ocean region and justifies its military presence in this region due to its economic ties

and security pacts with the surrounding states.

It is also observed that China's maritime potency and influence have covered the entire South China Sea, grown in the Indian Ocean and has also expanded in the Gulf of Aden and the Persian Gulf due to its growing trade and reasons to protect its sea lanes of communication.

However, India considers itself as a major regional power of the Indian Ocean and wants to be the net security provider in the region. India also wants to protect sea lanes of communication in the South China Sea and the East China Sea as it has developed close economic and security ties with such countries as Singapore, Vietnam, South Korea, and Japan, which are supported by the U.S. and questioned by China. It is, therefore, fair to suggest that the Indian Ocean is witnessing an overlap of interests and influence of the U.S., China and India. As a result, it is bound to become a centre of 21st century international disputes and power dynamics.



(Source: diplomatist.com)

In 2014, then U.S. President Barak Obama stated in a speech at the U.S. West Point Military Academy that the U.S. would lead the world for another 100 years. Seemingly, his speech was referring to the Asia Pacific, where the U.S. wants to assume leadership as Asia appears to be taking the lead in steady development and turning out to be the centre of global growth. Precisely because of that growth, the U.S. leadership in Asia may be more undefined and offers the panorama of a new geopolitical edifice.



(Source: history.com)

The above-mentioned situation and intentions have in turn triggered doubt and ambiguity in the U.S. eyes about Chinese contention to the U.S.'s maritime power in Asia. "Pivot to Asia", or more specifically so-called "U.S. rebalancing", demonstrates the realisation of American strategic thinking about Washington's perceived threat which it believes China poses to the U.S., not only diplomatically but also economically.

In policy terms, the so-called "U.S. rebalancing" under the Obama administration was based on three sets of initiatives, namely, security, economic and diplomatic initiatives. On the strategic ground, one of the U.S.'s core intentions, particularly after 9/11, is to provide absolute security to its citizens from extremism. For this very purpose, its defence forces are positioned worldwide to deal with terrorist threats to the U.S. and its allies. However, fundamentally, it is also eager to "balance power" against a possible rising regional power--China, which is, both economically and diplomatically, capable of confronting the only existing global power. Such a possible scenario has led the U.S. to strengthen its alliances with South Korea, Australia, Japan, Thailand, the Philippines and most importantly, India to address its very own concerns.

Since the Obama administration, the U.S. has been interested in upholding the

status quo, which favours itself. Washington wishes to protect its sea lanes of communications, maintain “freedom of navigation” in the so-called “international waters” of South China Sea in the name of the United Nation Convention on the Law of the Sea (although it is not a signatory party to this Convention) and to make sure that all the conflicting parties abide by the 2002 “Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea” (DOC). More importantly, the U.S. doesn’t want this region to be dominated by China, which it sees as its geopolitical challenger.



(Source: Online)

As a result, the U.S. has strengthened its continuous diplomatic and military presence and also is adopting diverse multilateral approaches to advance its agenda of curbing China and Russia’s influence in the Asia-Pacific. The U.S. also wants to prevent the weapons of mass destruction proliferation as it perceives nuclear capabilities of North Korea as a threat to itself and its allies. Washington also wants to improve relations with potential new allies such as Vietnam and increase cooperation with other major regional powers like India.

The Trump administration has replaced the term “Asia Pacific” with “Indo-Pacific” and the current Biden administration has carried it forward. Under the Trump administration’s “America First” policy, the economic element of the U.S. engagement in this region has diminished through decisions like withdrawing from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, but the security and diplomatic elements have been maintained. This was reflected through Trump’s visits to various Asian countries on the backdrop of the East Asia Summit held in November 2017. On December 31, 2018, he signed “Asia Reassurance Initiative Act”. This act provides a clearer insight

into multifaceted U.S. engagements in Asia-Pacific as a long-term vision. It reassures the U.S. commitment to support all its allies and strategic partners in the region. This law is so far the boldest step that the U.S. Congress has taken to contain China in its own waters.



(Source: nytimes.com)

The Biden administration took office on the back of two main promises: Firstly, at the domestic level, it will discard various policies initiated by the Trump administration. Secondly, at the international level, it will do away with Trump's self-isolation strategy under its "America First" policy. It aims at rejuvenating the U.S. foreign policy by placing the U.S. at the epicentre of the world affairs through repairing its relations with its old allies and developing close relations with new ones. In his first diplomatic address, Biden proclaimed "America is back". He claimed that the U.S. should stand up to the challenges posed by China and Russia.

Judging from Biden's speech and the forthcoming policies his administration has already announced, one can presume that the U.S. sees itself as "affianced" to Asia and regards itself as the net security provider in the region. The U.S. believes that it must maintain "its leading position" as long as possible. The geopolitical and geostrategic significance of the Asia-Pacific places the U.S. as the most enthusiastic, yet most potent competitor in the region.

To this end, the discrepancy in economic and military abilities between India and China is highly significant. However, despite its limited resources, India poses a substantial challenge to China's growing influence, particularly in the Indian Ocean theatre. Hence, India will continue to keenly indicate its presence in this and other regions vital to its interests. For the time being, Sino-India relation appears to be avoiding confrontation, demonstrating a commitment to friendly cooperation, but at the same time, they are also preparing themselves for future disruptions.



(Source: Xinhua.com)

Confusion Matrix in the Oceans



(Source: weeklyblitz.net)

1. Introduction

In 1937, Hollywood legends Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers debuted the Gershwin classic ‘Let’s Call the Whole Thing Off’. The classic duet joyfully plays on the British English and American English pronunciations of words such as “tomato” and they agree to disagree. This cultural artefact was some 20 years after the term “Indo-Pacific” was first coined by German geographer Karl Haushofer in the 1920s. In the present day, global powers agree to disagree on the terminology of the “Indo-Pacific”.

The term “Indo-Pacific” has made a resurgence in recent years, but remains a point of contention in the international community. Recent use of the term is mainly due to the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue’s active and plentiful Indo-Pacific strategies which many see as acting to counter China’s rise. China does not acknowledge or use the term “Indo-Pacific”, preferring to use “Asia-Pacific”. This is to include all regional

countries, including ASEAN members in such discussions. After all, it is a phrase devised by a member of the 1930s Nazi Germany elite.

Commonly known as “The Quad”, Australia, Japan, India and the United States work together as part of a diplomatic grouping and conduct joint military exercises. Although the dialogue mellowed when Australia changed its political leaders in 2009, it returned with political impetus in 2017 with Donald Trump at the helm of the United States. In 2020, a “Quad Plus” meeting included New Zealand, South Korea and Vietnam.

In recent months, there has been indications of support from the European Union, Canada and the United Kingdom. This expanding list of supporters and rise of “Indo-Pacific” partnerships may develop into serious challenges for nations in a geopolitical context. Could a simple turn of phrase indicate which side of US-China competition nations lie upon? Many will have to choose their words carefully to overcome modern-day economic interdependence of the United States and China, as well as increasing militarization of the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

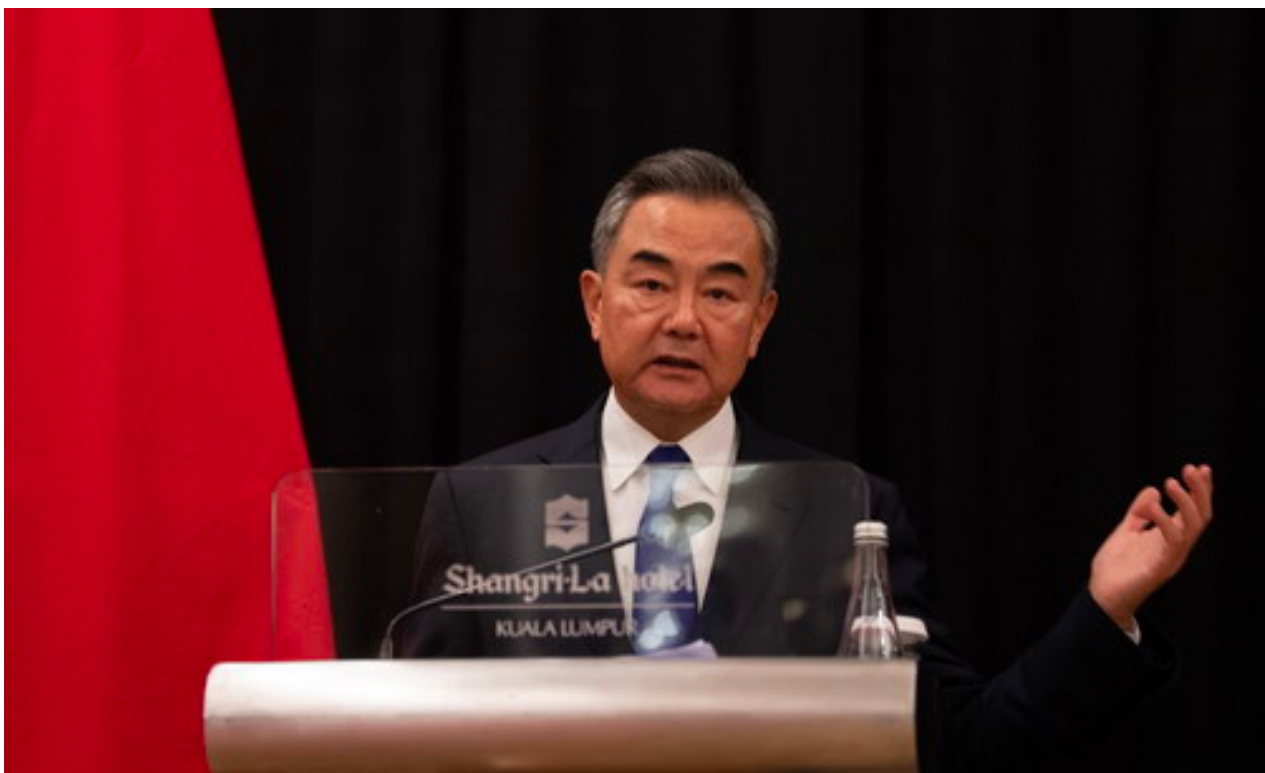
This issue of TI Observer (TIO) will delve deeper into the “Confusion Matrix in the Oceans” and highlight the strategic implications of “Asia-Pacific” and “Indo-Pacific” across the semantics and policy lexicon of international diplomacy. It tracks the origins of the phrase from German geographer Haushofer and alternatives including Chinese mariner and explorer Zheng He up to the present day, and explores the contemporary proponents of the Indo-Pacific narrative.



(Source: asiafundmanagers.com)

Furthermore, the TI Observer will present an Asia-Pacific framework for the regional order, highlighting the epicenter of Asia-Pacific and the potential for multilateral international cooperation to counteract unilateralism and so-called “minilateralism”. It will also underscore the interplay between regional economic interdependence and emerging security dynamics in the Asia-Pacific to discover the emerging patterns and tendencies of the day.

Finally, the TIO will wrap up with an in-depth review into China’s modern-day perspective on the “Indo-Pacific”. Many influential figures in China advocate that national interests should continue to stand up against the terminology of the “Indo-Pacific” as its meaning is no song and dance - it has far reaching consequences for modern-day international diplomacy.



(Source: gd.china-embassy.org)

2. Confusion Matrix in the Oceans

2.1 Asia-Pacific vs Indo-Pacific: Choice of terminology and its strategic implications

The term “Indo-Pacific” has been gradually introduced into the policy lexicon in various regional frameworks over the past couple of decades. Such efforts have gained particular momentum in recent years, with further emphasis placed on replacing the term “Asia-Pacific” in both diplomatic jargon and public and media discourse. There are various reasons and motives behind this strategy pursued by a number of countries, namely the United States and what it calls its traditional and regional allies.

Unlike the Asia-Pacific region that is well defined geographically, the “Indo-Pacific” geographical expanse is undefined. What is referred to as the “Indo-Pacific” consists of the Pacific Ocean, the Indian Ocean, and the landmasses surrounding them. It is an outcome of the growing impact of China in the Indian Ocean region that marks the significance of the Indian and Pacific Oceans to trade, security and the interrelation between the two.



(Source: Online)

Over the past couple of decades, the U.S. administrations concluded that the “Asia-Pacific” did not match its political and military geography and trade policy objectives in Asia. In their perceptions, the inadequacy of the term was due to two developments: Firstly, China’s rise and increasing influence in the region. Second, Washington’s need to include New Delhi in the region-wide security structure.

As a result, the U.S. has subscribed to the idea of expanding the “Asia- Pacific” to

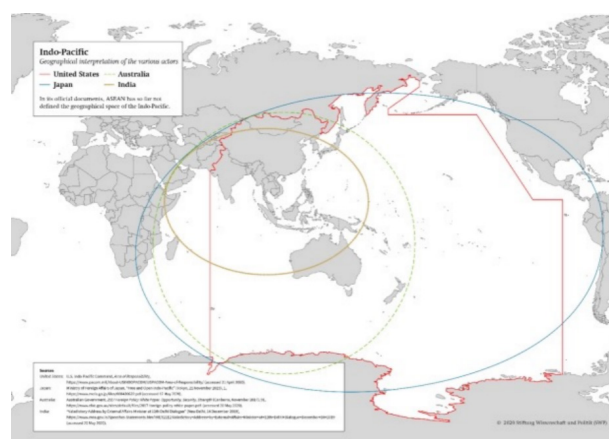
“Indo-Pacific”. Comprising of the two gigantic oceans as a hub for significant geostrategic, military, economic and energy operations, the region was deemed to be crucial to the U.S. as it wanted to remain the most relevant power in Asia. Therefore, it was first called the “Indo-Asia Pacific” to be followed by the “Indo-Pacific”. The focal point behind such a move was Washington’s intentions to introduce geostrategic measures concerning China and the U.S. allies in the region.¹

Defining Asia in geographical or other terms has strategic implications. The region is of economic, diplomatic and military significance to many countries. India embraced the term “Indo-Pacific” as a tool to serve its national interests and spread its influence eastward through such policies as “Look East” and the rebranded “Act East”. However, the fast-changing developments in the region, the Biden administration’s policies and military and diplomatic groupings supported by Washington have left India with tough choices to make.

The complex web of relations and interdependencies in the region affect each country’s ability to pursue unilateral or even minilateral policies. The strategic and economic interrelations within the two regions and between the regional countries also expose each country’s strengths and weaknesses.

From “confluence of the two seas” by Japan to the “Look/Act East” policy by India and “free and open Indo-Pacific” by the U.S. and Australia, there are intensified efforts in the region that can only deepen divisions and risk military confrontation. The Quad, a quadrilateral agreement that brings together those four countries, is a case in point. The choice of terms affects strategies and perceptions.

Indo-Pacific: Geographical interpretation of various actors



(Source: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2020)

1 Kuo, Mercy A. "The origin of 'Indo-Pacific's geopolitical construct." *The Diplomat* 25 (2018)

The “Indo-Pacific” establishment, the proponents of the term “Indo-Pacific, in other words, opens the Asia-Pacific region to a military competition whose ramifications are unlikely to benefit any party.

China and the Quad: Military Power Matrix (2020/21)

	China	The Quad	United States	Japan	Australia	India
Active Military Personnel	2.18mn	3.68mn	1.40mn	247,150	59,760	1.44mn
Reserve Military Personnel	510,000	3.04mn	860,000	56,000	28,500	2.1mn
Naval Vessels	350	645	293	101	50	201
Aircraft*	3210	17,412	13,264	1,561	464	2,123
Aircraft carriers**	2 (+1, by 2023)	27	20	4	2	1
Defense Spending	\$261bn	\$893.8bn	\$731bn	\$49bn	\$42.7bn	\$71.1bn
Defense Spending %GDP	1.9%	2.91%	3.4%	0.9%	1.9%	2.4%
* Includes all types of aircraft from all branches.						
** Includes both traditional aircraft carriers and helicopter-carrying vessels.						

(Source: Burns, N. (2020), based on information from World Bank, Lowly Institute, SIPRI, SCMP, India TV News, U.S. DOD, Australian Government Department of Defense, Global Firepower, IISS, Statista.)

China's peaceful rise and policies such as the Belt and Road Initiative and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road under it are not intended to, but are regarded by some as to challenge the United States' influence in the region, traversing a vast expanse of oceans and seas to countries in different continents, connecting the East and the West and increasing the exchanges of commodities, people and culture among countries situated on the Road.²

China's main objective is to prevent any political, economic, or military confrontation. It wants a peaceful correlation with its adjacent countries as well as the United States. Any confrontation could cause a collateral damage in the region for all involved.³ China's influence in the region is inevitable given its size and geostrategic location at the crossroads of major maritime routes.⁴

2 Medcalf, Rory. "Reimagining Asia: From Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific." In *International Relations and Asia's Southern Tier*, pp. 9-28. Springer, Singapore, 2018.

3 Li, Mingjiang. "The Belt and Road Initiative: geo-economics and Indo-Pacific security competition." *International Affairs* 96, no. 1 (2020): 169-187.

4 Rajagopalan, Rajesh. "Evasive balancing: India's unviable Indo-Pacific strategy." *International Affairs* 96, no. 1 (2020): 75-93.

The region's future depends on how countries choose to resolve their differences and disagreements and work together to address issues of common interest from climate hazards to maritime security to ensure peace and prosperity in the most populated region across the globe.



(Source: beltandroad.news)

2.2 Semantics and Policy Lexicon

The term Indo-Pacific's journey into the policy lexicon followed an interesting path, which also sheds spotlight on the proponents of the term. In 2007, then Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe first proclaimed the idea of a “confluence of the two seas” in a speech in New Delhi, India.⁵ It was not until the 2012 “Australia in the Asian Century” white paper that an official terminology, “Indo-Pacific”, was born to encompass the initial idea.⁶ With the shift of administrations, then U.S. President Trump incorporated the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy”-- again initially

⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, “Speech by His Excellency Mr. Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan, at the Parliament of the Republic of India ‘Confluence of the Two Seas’” (New Delhi, 22 August 2007), <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/speech-2.html>

⁶ Australia in the Asian Century. Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (Australia), 2012. https://www.defence.gov.au/whitepaper/2013/docs/australia_in_the_asian_century_white_paper.pdf

proposed by the Japanese Prime Minister in 2016 -- as the focal American strategy within the region in 2017. Since then, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, French President Emmanuel Macron, and some ASEAN member states have adopted this term into their policy lexicon, both in official documents and dialogues.

Linguistically, the prefix “Indo-” refers to anything relating to India or the Indian subcontinent, and in this case, it refers to the Indian Ocean. “Pacific”, with its dual meaning of calm as well as relating to the Pacific Ocean, was coined by explorer Ferdinand Magellan to describe the peaceful body of water. Thus, simply combining the prefix “Indo-” with its partner “Pacific” refers to geographical areas, where, like Abe suggested, two seas converge and encompass. Some fields of study, such as oceanography or marine biology, utilize this term in its neutral connotation to specifically denote the area where species are found in between the two seas.



(Source: ChinaMilitary)

However, the political semantics and symbolism of “Indo-Pacific” constructs a region based on “geopolitical nomenclature.”⁷ Additionally, the implications of a “free and open” area encourage the promotion of what some Western policymakers call the “rules-based international order” within the regional order that aligns with fair trade practices and political entanglements. However, confusion emerges regarding the vagueness as to where these geographic boundaries end. The entirety of the Indian and Pacific Oceans gives more flexibility and access to American influence within the region, especially the more contentious maritime areas like the South China Sea. Conversely, China rebukes these semantics as an attempt to stifle the rise of China in

⁷ John Hemmings, Global Britain in the Indo-Pacific, Asia Studies Centre, Research Paper no. 2/2018 (London: Henry Jackson Society, May 2018), 17.

the area and in general. The conflict in terminology and rhetoric narratives embodies the contentious Sino-American relationship emerging from within the region.

Depending on the perspective, the “Indo-Pacific” term either serves national interests or stifles them, and possibly even for those caught in the crossfire, it confuses and complicates national interests. The countries allied closely to the U.S. in the quadrilateral relations (i.e., Japan, India, and Australia) encourage partnerships to strengthen military defense, security guarantees, and economic/infrastructural aid. These democratic allied countries link issues of good governance, reciprocal trade, and open market access to a grandiose strategy of U.S.-backed dominance in the region. In this same manner, the grouping of alliances has initiated a return to minilateral and bilateral relations that, whether intentionally or unintentionally, exclude China.



(Source: News.cn)

Of course, with such stark divisions in the regional order, China has responded with its own narrative of an “Asia-Pacific” area. Beijing rejects the “America first” ideology and sentiment of alliance in the region, refusing to subjectively categorize the ocean as boundary constrained. The lexicon of China implicates the desire to combat the American narrative but to do so in a not so combative way, much in line with the broader peaceful rise approach of China.

For other countries, choosing a specific policy lexicon would be ultimately construed as picking a side in the intensifying major power rivalry. In perspective, the terminology of China and the U.S. send different signals to those other countries.

Regardless of the semantics and lexicon, it has become quite clear that this region will grow in importance in the coming future discussions of security, trade, development, human rights, etc. Therefore, a consensus on a narrative framework for the region is integral in sustaining a peaceful international order.

2.3 A Historical Perspective

For an over a millennium the Indo-Pacific region has been essential to trade. Traders used favourable winds to send goods back and forth between Asia and Europe.⁸ China, like today's "Belt and Road" project, had both overseas and overland trade routes known as the Silk Road. The comparison with the modern world is striking given the ancient and modern Chinese trade.⁹

As history went on, and these trade routes became more important, competing empires would vie for control. Eventually, clashes between the two over-extended empires would occur in the Talas river area, north of the Indian sub-continent. Historic reports at the time were based on statements from captured prisoners¹⁰, showing that trade had already declined by the mid-8th century due to war. Later, many important documents related to history and trade were lost in the course of the collapse of the Tang Dynasty before the later Tang (923-36 AD)¹¹ would be re-established, demonstrating how conflict in the region can lead to great loss of knowledge.

By the end of the Tang, Arabs were regular attendees in the court sending embassies¹² in a precursor to modern international relations, although China's far flung international interests meant it had relations with over 70 nations at this time.¹³

After the fall of Mongol rule in China, the emperor of Ming dispatched Admiral Zheng He to explore the region with an impressive fleet of 60 large vessels and nearly 30,000 sailors on his first voyage alone. Loaded with treasure, these massive ships sailed the Pacific and Indian Oceans, and reached as far as East Africa.

Even before this, in antiquity exploration was mainly pursued by traders promoting people to people and commercial exchange, rather than state funded exploration¹⁴,

8 John Matthews, "Roman Perspectives, Studies in the Social, Political and cultural history of the First to Fifth Centuries", The Classical Press of Wales, 2010, p 161

9 Xi Jinping, "The Governance of China", Foreign Languages Press, 2014, p 285

10 Robert G Hoyland, "Seeing Islam as Others Saw it", Darwin Press, 1997, p 244

11 Ibid. p 249

12 Ibid.,p 254

13 Xi Jinping, Ibid., p 285

14 Matthews, Ibid., p 162

so China's attempt at reaching out in the Ming period was a massive step towards contact with other nations. Zheng He and other Chinese explorers found that Indian city states did not operate in a vacuum but competed with each other for trade,¹⁵ leading to the Chinese visiting many ports in the period, rather than just one. With the absence of the Mongol Empire controlling trade, this became a golden age for Chinese investment in the region and continued until the 15th Century "bullion famine" or as some writers have put it, a middle ages equivalent to a credit crunch.¹⁶ caused by massive outflows of silver to the East to pay for silk and other luxuries. Far from being a recent development, history shows that China has been active in the region, both over land and sea for hundreds of years.

2.4 Who are the proponents of the Indo-Pacific narrative?

As a political concept the vast area some refer to as the "Indo-Pacific" has only recently been developed, with an increasing emphasis after 2010.¹⁷ Proponents of this narrative include NATO and other Western forces as well as their allies in the region including "The Quad". The U.S. has also built up the largest naval presence in the region.



(Source: Online)

For groups like "The Quad", the primary mission is to effectively box in China from South, East and West. Other proponents of the Indo-Pacific narrative include NATO,

¹⁵ Peter Frankopan, "The Silk Roads, A new History of the World", Bloomsbury, 2016, p 195

¹⁶ Frankopan, Ibid., p 196

¹⁷ Shreya Upadhyay, "The Indo-Pacific & the Indo-U.S. Relations: Geopolitics of Cooperation", Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, Nov. 1, 2014, Date accessed July 21, 2021, http://www.ipcs.org/issue_select.php?recNo=574

which has also turned its sights to China recently.¹⁸

The UK also has its eyes on power projection in the region to promote the “Global Britain” narrative as part of the Brexit process.¹⁹ Possible drawbacks are that these naval actions may just push nations to trade with China more if supply lines are endangered. Against such a backdrop, there should be much work put into keeping an option open for multilateralism and co-operation on any upcoming diplomatic issues.

However, from a historical point of view, it might be worth remembering that the colonialist powers had to leave while the Chinese that arrived with Zheng He are still present in the region, long after the colonialists left their forts.²⁰

3. An Asia-Pacific Framework for Regional Order



(Source: *thediplomat.com*)

As countries in the Asia-Pacific have to share long and often unpatrolled sea borders, there is high risk of confrontation and it is not uncommon to hear of fishermen entering each other's waters. The regional countries occasionally accuse one another of such breaches. For relations to improve, there should be proper regional dialogue with all nations involved. The Chinese foreign ministry has made it clear

18 Antony Zurcher, “Nato warns of military challenge posed by China”, BBC, June 15, 2021, Date Accessed July 14, 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-57466210>

19 Patrick Wintour, “Why Britain is tilting to the Indo-Pacific region”, The Guardian, March 15, 2021 Date Accessed July 14, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2021/mar/15/why-britain-is-tilting-to-the-indo-pacific-region>

20 Howard W. French, “Everything Under the Heavens, How the Past Helps Shape China's Push for Global Power” Scribe, 2017, p95

that it does not promote regional “cliques”.²¹ The divisive policies could only increase chances for conflict.

Instead of trying to counter China, all involved and relevant parties should engage in multilateral dialogue. This does not seem to be happening at the moment. Although there was optimism at the start of the Biden administration, the U.S. has continued its policy of pressuring the regional countries. The situation in the Asia-Pacific could become worse if the regional countries don’t start to talk about differences and how to work around them to achieve regional order and ensure stability.

One must remember that the Ming had the ships, men and money to project imperialist designs but refrained to do so because Zheng He saw harmony and trade as a less burdensome way to accumulate wealth.²²

3.1 Where is the epicenter of the Asia-Pacific?

Gradually, as time moves, the idea of a “centre of power” moves. Across different time periods, different regions and actors have become the center of gravity. The efforts to introduce such terms as “Indo-Pacific” are related to strategies to shift those centers of gravity.

However, a closer look at the trade within the Asia-Pacific sheds light on where the most interactions and multinational activities and exchanges are taking place. The ASEAN today has emerged as China’s number 1 trade partner. The most important sea lanes of communication also go through the South China and East China Seas as opposed to only the westward part of the Indian Ocean being of significance due to the oil shipping lanes.

Lessons can be learnt from Zheng He, whose treasure ships were raided in Sri Lanka and was known to use at least reciprocal force in defending the Ming fleet²³. China today also protects its merchant ships from modern day piracy. The freedom of navigation can be achieved if regional leaders sit down and engage in dialogue. As nation states developed and some countries declined due to European colonialism,

21 Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian's Regular Press Conference on March 12, 2021, Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs March 12, 2021, Date accessed July 14, 2021, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1860582.shtml

22 Howard W. French, “Everything Under the Heavens, How the Past Helps Shape China’s Push for Global Power” Scribe, 2017, p97

23 Ibid., p 103

historic routes and relationships faded into history. Only cooperative dynamics in the region can help revive them.

3.2. Unilateralism, Multilateralism, and Minilateralism



(Source: koreaherald.com)

Spanning the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) agreement of 1989, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) of 1994, Japan's Security Diamond of 2013,²⁴ China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of 2013, Australia's Embracing the Indo-Pacific of 2013,²⁵ and India's Act East Policy of 2015,²⁶ narratives on approaches towards an Asia-Pacific order are illusory. Whether they are unilateral, multilateral, or minilateral, these narratives diverge widely and the illusions they are based on make distinguishing between competition and cooperation difficult.

Applied in this region, unilateralism would need a reconceptualization, since it differs from the unilateral policies which the U.S. applied during the Great Depression of 1929–32²⁷ and from Donald Trump's "America First" doctrine of 2017–2020.

²⁴ Japan's proposal for a Democratic Security Diamond was sketched out by former Japanese PM Shinzo Abe in early 2013 as a charm offensive in response to China's rise in the Pacific.

²⁵ This policy was unveiled in Australia's 2013 National Security Strategy document, which pegged "the Asia-Pacific as Australia's primary strategic and economic frame." See Government of Australia, "Strong and Secure – A Strategy for Australia's National Interest," Canberra: 2013.

²⁶ The Act East Policy (EAP) was unexpectedly unveiled by Narendra Modi following his inauguration as India's prime minister in 2015. This policy was cultivated over the former Premier Narsimha Rao's Look East Policy, enacted in 1991, which had been mocked by former U.S. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton in 2011 for its lack of pragmatism and failure to influence Southeast Asia (East of India).

²⁷ Due to domestic political issues, the U.S. applied unilateral import restrictions in order to fulfill Franklin

Although China unilaterally initiated its One Belt One Road initiative (later to become the BRI) in 2013, this grand policy's hedge depends immensely on multilateral planes, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and other minilateral aspects, including the China-led Lancang-Mekong Cooperation. Indeed, in terms of making the Pacific order glue, unilateralism lacks viability for three main reasons.



(Source: *gulfnews.com*)

First, because such dominant players as China, India, Australia, and ASEAN—not to mention the far-off U.S.—have a history of Western colonialism, they tend toward regional collectivism as the prime way to a safeguard regional order while leaving their national sovereignty untouched. The ASEAN Charter, for instance, enables its members to work collectively against external threats and descale the possibility of internal conflict, with their respective sovereignty legally upheld.²⁸

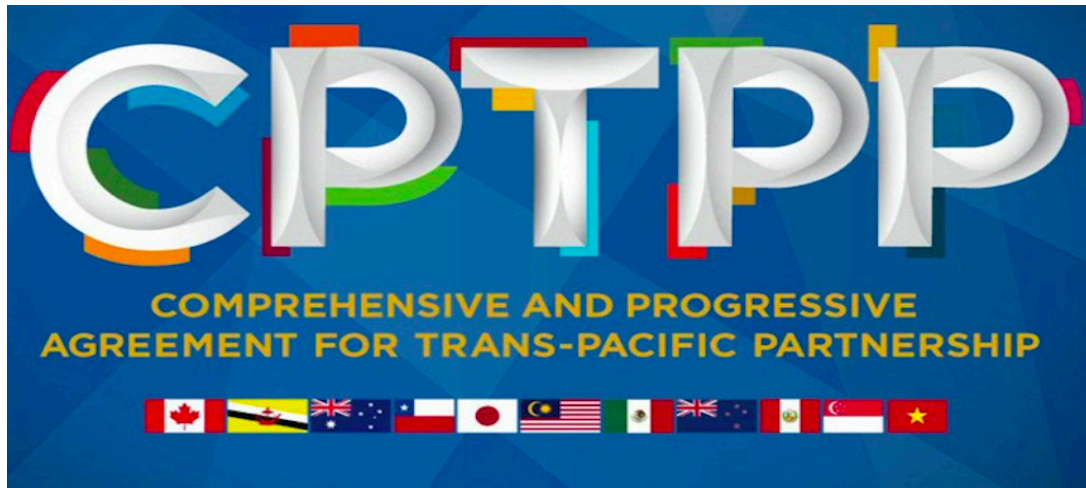
Second, as economic and security imperatives in the Pacific have just gained momentum from the 2000s, and security stakes and economic growth bases are not owned by any single state, leveraging only unilateralism would be counterproductive. For example, the national insecurity posed for Japan by North Korea's nuclearization is contingent on China's position in East Asia,²⁹ while China's BRI ambitions

D. Roosevelt's pre-election pledges of promoting farmers' and US workers' welfares, which subsequently witnessed retaliation in the form of import restrictions from its trade partners, including Australia and Canada.

²⁸ See ASEAN Charter 2007, Art.2, para 2(a)(b)(c).

²⁹ China has strategic security interests in North Korea as the latter constitutes a buffer zone for China to

depend, to some extent, on positive engagement on the part of Japan, India, Australia, ASEAN, and others. These security and economic webbing, the disintegration of which would destabilize the status quo through a regional domino effect, leave unilateralism no room for maneuver.



(Source: Online)

Third, although in international economics unilateralism has disguised itself in trade liberalization, the practice falls within the collective framework or manifests as “concerted unilateralism” whereby states gather for specific common objectives with unilateral approaches individually embraced.³⁰ The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) is an example: although the parties’ offers in tariff schedule differ based on unilateral rationales, taking into account their “different stages of development and economic needs,”³¹ the RCEP’s main objective is to achieve a modern, comprehensive, high-quality, and mutually beneficial economic partnership agreement for the bloc.³² Concerted unilateralism availed within a framework of multilateralism thus helps achieve the necessary compromise due to socioeconomic differences and ascertains the parties’ peaceful coexistence. Though the RCEP appears to have less qualitative aspects than the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP),³³ the former’s

counterbalance U.S. hegemony on China’s periphery—that is, in Japan and South Korea. In April 2021, U.S. President Joe Biden called for China’s cooperation to realize the verifiable and irreversible dismantlement of North Korea’s nuclear program. See Chan Young Bang, “The U.S. Needs China’s Support to Denuclearize North Korea,” *The Diplomat*, last modified April 23, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/04/the-us-needs-chinas-support-to-denuclearize-north-korea/>.

30 David Capie and Paul Evans, “The Asia-Pacific Security Lexicon,” ISEAS Publishing (2002): 82.

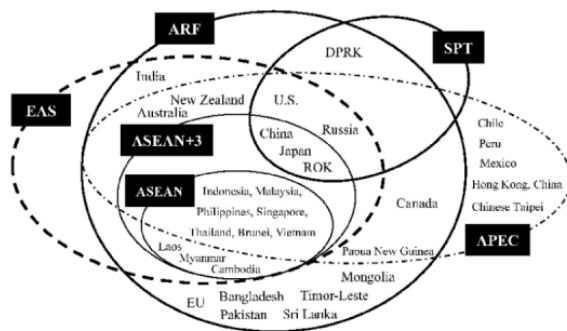
31 ASEAN, “Summary of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement,” (ND): 2.

32 See Preamble Clause 1 of the Guiding Principles and Objectives for Negotiating the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, 2012.

33 CPTPP sets stricter ‘common standards’ on labor issues, environmental protection, and dispute

allocated flexibilities are ideal for accommodating Asian pragmatism—that is, allowing for socioeconomic and political differences to achieve a common end.

(Figure 1: Multilateral Institutions in the Asia-Pacific)



(Source: Huaigao Qi, 2009)

As unilateral protectionism peaked under the Trump administration, multilateralism in the Pacific earned credibility. The US withdrawal from the TPP (now CPTPP) in 2017 augmented the RCEP negotiation process. Trump's deceleration of the US "Pivot to Asia" also prepared the ground for the BRI to maneuver in the Pacific and beyond. In fact,

the Asia-Pacific mode of multilateralism gained significant roots during the Cold War, starting with the creation of ASEAN in 1967, followed by the APEC 1989 and the ARF in 1994.

Less formal approaches also emerged in the form of "track II" diplomacy in the 1990s, including the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific (CSCAP) and the APEC Business Advisory Council, which have made multilateralism in the Pacific even more appealing in both governmental and non-governmental fora.³⁴

Further, the year 2005 saw the launch of the East Asia Summit (EAS), through which the 18 members³⁵ can advance the regional order via strategic dialogues on political, security, and economic challenges facing the region.³⁶ In the 15th EAS Chairperson's Statement,³⁷ leaders emphasized the critical importance of EAS in strengthening multilateralism, an international order anchored in international law, strategic trust, and transparent, predictable, and responsible behaviors.³⁸

resolution than those proposed in the RCEP. See Meaghan Tobin, "Explained: the difference between the RCEP and the CPTPP," South China Morning Post, last modified July 06, 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/geopolitics/article/3017487/explained-difference-between-rcep-and-cptpp>.

34 Amitav Acharya, "Multilateralism: Is There an Asia-Pacific Way," The National Bureau of Asian Research 8, no.2, (1997): 5.

35 These 18 Members are ASEAN 10 + Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, Russia, and the U.S.

36 Australian Government, "East Asia Summit (EAS)," Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

37 The Statement was announced in the 15th EAS held virtually on 14 November 2020 and chaired by the Vietnamese Premier.

38 See para 4 of the Chairman's Statement of the 15th East Asia Summit, Vietnam, 14 November 2020.

Minilateralism is another approach that is being put to dynamic use in the region. The concept of minilateralism stems from multilateralism but quantitatively involves fewer participants with specific common interests and qualitatively breaks issues down to address them more specifically.³⁹ Since the APEC comprises players with competing interests, which sometimes distract from the shared journey towards stated objectives,⁴⁰ the Pacific's minilateral style has recently gained attention. In 2002, the Trilateral Strategic Dialogue (TSD), comprising Japan, Australia, and the U.S., began functioning, followed by the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD), membered by Japan, Australia, India, and the U.S. in 2007.⁴¹ The latest minilateral scheme is the LMC involving China and the Indo-Chinese countries (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam) launched in 2015. Yet, more than traditional security concerns, the LMC emphasizes water management, agricultural development, and infrastructural connectivity, which facilitate China's roles in the Mekong region through its BRI infrastructure projects.⁴² Other platforms include the Malacca Strait Patrols, launched in 2006,⁴³ and the Sulu Sea Trilateral Patrols,⁴⁴ among others.

Despite the proliferation of numerous platforms, a space of confrontation is inevitable because the actors involved leverage two main poles of power: China and the U.S. The South China Sea, presently at the heart of the Pacific order, has weakened promised efforts for regional cooperation, as non-claimant states (especially the

39 Bhubhindar Singh & Sarah Teo, 'Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific' Routledge (2020) 4. See also Angaindrankumar Gnanasagaran, "Is Minilateralism the Way Forward," The ASEAN Post, last modified May 27, 2018. <https://theaseanpost.com/article/minilateralism-way-forward>.

40 The APEC has been criticized by business leaders for diverting its focus from trade liberalization to high-security issues including terrorism, which fails to reflect its objective as set in the Bogor Statement, Indonesia, in 1994. See Choe Sang Hun, "APEC's Relevance Is Under Scrutiny," The New York Times, last modified November 14, 2005, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/11/14/world/asia/apecs-relevance-is-under-scrutiny.html>.

41 The QSD was proposed by Japan's former PM Shinzo Abe in 2007 but lost ground following Abe's resignation that year. It was brought back to Asia Pacific's narratives in 2017, however, to counter China's rise as the responsible power in the region. See Bhubhindar Singh and Sarah Teo, *Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific* (London: Routledge, 2020), 8.

42 Ibid. In 2021, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi lauded the LMC for promoting connectivity between China and the Mekong countries and for reducing poverty over the past five years. Two-way trade between China and the Mekong countries reached USD 322.1 billion in 2020 alone, up by 66.3 percent from 2015. Under the LCM framework, China has supported over 40 projects in the Mekong countries. See Statement of Wang Yi, "Lancang-Mekong Cooperation: After Five Fruitful Years, A New Journey Awaits — Marking the Fifth Anniversary of the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation" (04 April 2021).

43 The Malacca Strait Patrols is a trilateral initiative by Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia to combat transnational crime in the Malacca Strait, including sea robbery and piracy. See Koh Swee and Lean Collin, "The Malacca Strait Patrols: Finding Common Ground" RSIS (20 April 2016).

44 The Sulu Sea Trilateral Patrols or Sulu-Sulawesi Seas Patrols (SSSP) was launched in 2017 by Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines to protect the two seas from transnational crime. However, suspicions are increasing about whether this scheme is functional or not. See Hadyu Ikrami, "Sulu-Sulawesi Seas Patrol: Lessons from the Malacca Straits Patrol and Other Similar Cooperative Frameworks," *The International Journal of Marine and Coastal Law* 33, no. 4 (2018): 799-826.



(Source: chinaarabcf.org/)

U.S., Japan, and Australia) have inserted their stakes there to offset China's rise.⁴⁵ These pressure-filled engagements from the U.S. and its allies, with whom some ASEAN states (such as Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar) have struggled to maintain balance, have put the ASEAN's coherence under scrutiny.⁴⁶ One emerging risk is the cessation of the multilateral and minilateral efforts constructed thus far, which would in turn endanger the Pacific order itself.⁴⁷

3.3. Regional Economic Interdependence and Security Dynamics

Economic development and foreign trade are more adequate and less costly than

⁴⁵ One obvious example is the U.S.-Japan-Australia trilateral naval exercises in the South China Sea in October 2020 as the U.S. called for a "free and open" Indo-Pacific. See "U.S., Japan, Australia conducted naval exercises in the South China Sea Monday - U.S. Navy," Reuters, last modified October 20, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/southchinasea-trilateral-int-idUSKBN2750KR>.

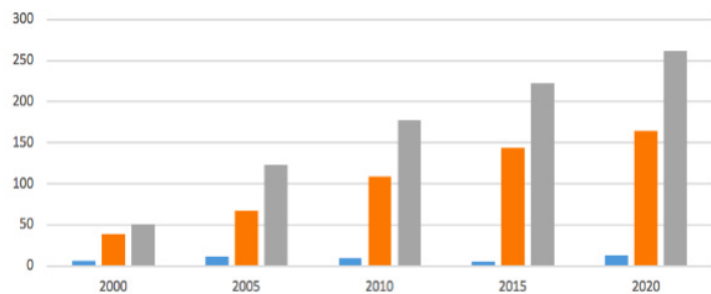
⁴⁶ For instance, the failure of Cambodia, in the capacity as ASEAN chair, to produce a joint communique in 2012 (aka the Phnom Penh Incident 2012) arguably created a blurred sense of the ASEAN's centrality. Moreover, Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand attempted to stay neutral in the South China Sea dispute by encouraging the claimant states to resort to the principles of international law (i.e. UNCLOS). See Bunthorn Sok, "Sorry ASEAN, Don't Blame Cambodia for the South China Sea Prolonged Resolve," Academia, last modified March 28, 2017, https://www.academia.edu/32084332/Sorry_ASEAN_Dont_Blame_Cambodia_for_the_South_China_Sea_Prolonged_Resolve.

⁴⁷ For instance, in November 2020, a Singaporean ex-diplomat Bilahari Kausikan said on a webinar that ASEAN should consider expelling Cambodia and Laos for serving China's proxies in the region. This statement, though not representing Singapore's governmental stance, prompted a lot of rhetorical responses from Cambodia's former diplomats. Observers argued that expelling Cambodia and Laos from ASEAN would be dangerous, potentially changing ASEAN's geopolitics and identity completely. See Umair Jamal, "Could ASEAN expel Cambodia and Laos over their allegiance to China?," ASEAN Today, last modified November 17, 2020, <https://www.aseantoday.com/2020/11/could-asean-expel-cambodia-and-laos-over-their-allegiance-to-china/>.

military warfare in advancing countries' prominence and prosperity.⁴⁸ Trade and investment barriers have been gradually removed globally over recent decades, despite the side-effect of eroding countries' national autonomy.⁴⁹

In the Asia Pacific, regional trade agreements (RTAs or FTAs) are increasingly popular (see Figure 2) as the multilateralism provided under APEC and WTO frameworks seems less effective.⁵⁰ Besides economic rationales, RTAs help minimize security standoffs in the region in two ways.

(Figure 2: FTAs in the Asia Pacific 2000-2020)



(Source: Asian Development Bank (2020))

First, economic interdependence limits the potential of gunboat diplomacy. Despite the South China Sea disputes, for example, Vietnam pursues a positive-sum game policy in its relations with both China and the U.S.⁵¹ Vietnam's aspiration to be a high-income country by 2045 requires critical economic engagement from China. In 2019, Vietnam-China trade reached around USD 160 billion, accounting for over 60 % of Vietnam's GDP that year.⁵² China is also the top source of raw materials for Vietnam's factories.⁵³ Though it is the country most resistant to China in the South China Sea, this heavy economic interdependence—complicated by both the vague commitment of the U.S. and the shared political ideology of China and Vietnam—means that Vietnam always engages China “politically and privately” at the top level to smooth things out when South China Sea disputes emerge.⁵⁴ The same applies to the positions of Cambodia, Thailand, and the Philippines, among others, toward the EU, the U.S., and China, as they think leaning too close to one or two would risk damaging trade and investment links with another. Economic interdependence thus make the Pacific

48 Robert Jackson and George Sorensen, *Introduction to International Relations: Theories and Approaches*, 3rd ed., (London: Oxford University Press, 2007) 103.

49 Daniel S. Papp, *Contemporary International Relations: Frameworks for Understanding*, 6th ed., (New York: Pearson, 2001) 57-58.

50 APEC is a loose, less formal, forum that does not oblige the participating economies to their trade liberalization commitments. Moreover, WTO is too big. So the members struggle to reach a consensus (i.e. the Doha Round of negotiations since 2001 has stalled until now, as a consensus has not been reached among 164 Members on various issues, agricultural goods in particular).

51 Vietnam tries to ensure that leaning too close to the U.S. recently for security leverages shall not be at the expense of Vietnam-China economic and diplomatic relations.

52 Ge Hongliang, “Vietnam Needs China to Fulfill Its 2045 Dream of Economic Revival,” *Global Times*, last modified February 02, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1178246.shtml>.

53 Ralph Jennings, “Vietnam Vows to ‘Firmly Resist’ Schemes to Undermine Relations with China,” *VOA News*, last modified May 21, 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/vietnam-vows-firmly-resist-schemes-undermine-relations-china>.

54 Ibid.

countries tend to strike the most balanced balancing act possible.

Second, promoting competition through economic interdependence incentivizes other economic considerations to emerge, since resorting to military remedies are costly—particularly so during the COVID-19 pandemic—and would nullify the efforts these countries have invested in their economic initiatives thus far. Convincing evidence of this view in the region is Japan’s repeated urging of the U.S. to rejoin the existing CPTPP⁵⁵ so as to challenge China’s perceived security dominance in the Pacific via economic initiatives. Japan and Australia also urged India to rejoin RCEP before February 2020 because this was seen as potentially benefitting their “Indo-Pacific” policies.⁵⁶

While the U.S. is occupied with domestic affairs, China’s BRI (the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Maritime Silk Road) is constructing sophisticated infrastructure across the Pacific and beyond, and this includes transforming landlocked countries, such as Laos, into land-linked ones. Yet some countries are against China’s economic initiatives near the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. Repeated U.S. accusations that China is aiming to create a naval base in Cambodia’s coastal province through BRI projects have recently marred the Cambodia-U.S. relationship.⁵⁷ Likewise, India claimed that the BRI’s China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) constitutes a security threat in the Indian Ocean.⁵⁸



(Source: Online)

55 Kaori Kaneko & Ami Miyazaki, “Japan Hopes U.S. Returns to TPP But Overhaul Tough: Negotiator,” Reuters, last modified February 20, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-trade-tp-japan-idUSKCN1G40ES>.

56 Suhasini Haida, “Japan, Australia Still Hopeful of India’s Rethink on RCEP,” The Hindu, last modified December 09, 2019, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/japan-australia-still-hopeful-of-indias-rethink-on-rcep/article30259774.ece>.

57 “Chinese Military Denies It Has Deal to Build Base in Cambodia,” Bloomberg, last modified July 24, 2019, from <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-07-24/chinese-military-denies-it-has-deal-to-build-base-in-cambodia?sref=9FZmBLh7>.

58 Kanwal Sibal, “China’s Maritime ‘Silk Road’ Proposals Are Not as Peaceful as They Seem,” Indian Defence Review, last modified February 26, 2014, <http://www.indiandefencereview.com/chinas-maritime-silk-road-proposals-are-not-as-peaceful-as-they-seem/>.

This growing interplay between economic interdependence and security dynamics will surely affect inter-state relations in the region for the years to come, with potential to push the regional actors either in the direction of seeking more dialogue and balancing act or military confrontations, the latter of which China, Japan, Australia, Vietnam, India, and others in the region have sought to avoid at all costs since the end of the Cold War.

4. China's narrative on the "Indo-Pacific"

Beijing has yet to issue any formal tit-for-tat response regarding the so-called "free and open Indo-Pacific" strategy the Quad members have been promoting. However, as can be reflected in Chinese officials' remarks on various high-profile occasions in recent years, China's attitude toward the Indo-Pacific concept has been dismissive. In 2019, for example, China's State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi said at the China-Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Foreign Ministers' Meeting held in Bangkok⁵⁹ that Beijing believes that regional states should focus on East Asia and existing cooperation mechanisms, no matter what narratives are brought up by Washington to drive a wedge in China's relations with its neighboring states. Referring to the ASEAN function, Wang commented that regional states should not be distracted by the Indo-Pacific initiative, engaging in geographic confrontational games and forming factions, but should instead focus on openness and inclusiveness, facilitating cooperation and consensus-building.

China's attitude towards the Indo-Pacific strategy was made even more explicit on October 13, 2020, when Wang Yi met with Malaysian Foreign Minister Hishammuddin Hussein and held a joint press conference in Kuala Lumpur. During the meeting, Wang stated that the Indo-Pacific strategy is essentially aimed at building a so-called Indo-Pacific "new NATO" underpinned by the quadrilateral mechanism that involves the U.S., Japan, India, and Australia.⁶⁰ It is to stir up confrontations among different blocs and to stoke geopolitical competition so as to help the United States secure its hegemonic system in the existing order, Wang said. The strategy signals a return to major power competition. It contravenes the spirit of mutual benefit and win-win spirit that has long been trumpeted by East Asian countries in pursuit of

59 Wang Yi Talks about Indo-Pacific Strategy. Last modified Jul. 31, 2019, last accessed Jul. 13, 2021. http://www.gov.cn/guowuyuan/2019-07/31/content_5417701.htm.

60 Wang Yi: U.S. 'Indo-Pacific Strategy' Undermines Peace and Development Prospects in East Asia. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. Last modified Oct. 13, 2020, last accessed Jul. 13, 2021. <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjbzhd/t1823539.shtml>.

cooperation and peaceful development and therefore regional countries should stay vigilant against it so that it does not threaten regional instability or another Cold War.



(Source: fmprc.gov.cn)

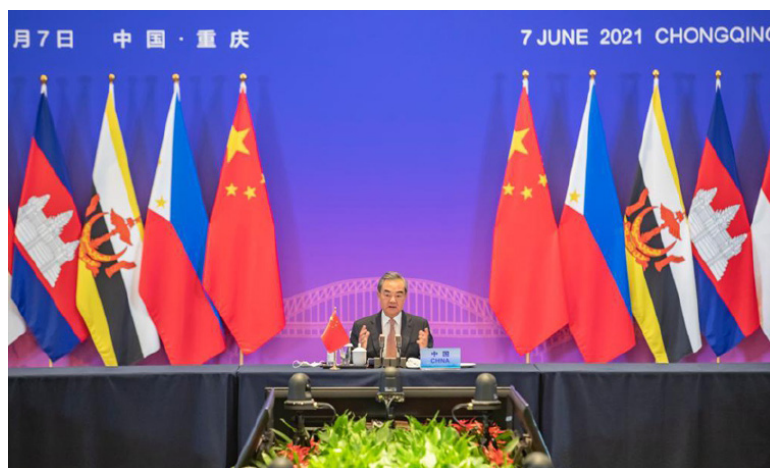
Wang expounded China's message on the Indo-Pacific strategy again in his speech delivered at the opening ceremony of the ninth World Peace Forum at Tsinghua University on July 3, 2021. The "Indo-Pacific Strategy," which seeks bloc confrontation and aims to create geographical rivalry, is a "regression of history that should be swept into the dustbin," Wang said, criticizing the U.S. for its Cold War mindset.⁶¹ He pointed out that all countries should work together in a spirit of mutual respect, fairness, and justice and called for opposing power politics, particularly the practice of pressuring and imposing the will and standards of a few countries on others while claiming to maintain the "rules-based order." For a century, China has been resolutely fighting unilateralism and promoting world peace and stability. It has always believed that all countries should be equal and it will never seek hegemony or engage in expansionism. However, the U.S. appears to have played a different role, Wang implied, citing examples of Washington's policies about the Taiwan issue, the Iranian nuclear deal, and specifically, the Indo-Pacific strategy.

Wang's view on the Indo-Pacific initiative has been repeatedly confirmed by other

61 Uphold World Peace and Promote Human Progress: Keynote Speech by State Councilor Wang Yi At the Opening Ceremony of the 9th World Peace Forum. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, last modified Jul. 3, 2021, last accessed Jul. 14, 2021. <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/wjzbzhd/t1889634.shtml>.

Chinese officials and scholars as well. On January 13, 2021, Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian commented that the ultimate goal of the American Indo-Pacific strategy is to suppress and contain China and undermine regional peace and stability.⁶² It is a strategy of hegemony, and its intention is malign.

Elaborating on this view, Zhao specifically pointed out the “three major mistakes” Washington has committed. The first one being the U.S. mentality of group confrontation, the second one a serious breach of the U.S. government’s commitment on Taiwan to China, and the third one a malicious distortion of China’s neighborhood diplomacy that hypes up the so-called “China threat” in the region. “As a responsible member of the Asia-Pacific, China actively practices neighborhood diplomacy of amity, sincerity, mutual benefit, and inclusiveness,” Zhao said. “[China] is committed to the path of peaceful development and a defense policy that is defensive in nature... [it is] a builder of world peace, a contributor to global development and guardian of international order.” Therefore, as he re-emphasized later during another regular press conference on June 17, 2021, the “outdated thinking” of some in the U.S. where China is perceived as an “imaginary enemy” so as to justify their attempt to increase the U.S. military might and spending and seek regional and global hegemony should be “destined to be cast aside.”⁶³



(Source: *globaltimes*)

Tan Kefei, Senior Colonel and Deputy Director of the Information Office of the Ministry of National Defense, stated at a regular press conference on May 27, 2021,

62 Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian’s Regular Press Conference on January 13, 2021. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, last modified Jan. 13, 2021, last accessed Jul. 13, 2021. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/fyrbt_673021/t1846158.shtml.

63 Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian’s Regular Press Conference on January 15, 2021. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, last modified Jan. 15, 2021, last accessed Jul. 13, 2021. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/fyrbt_673021/t1846668.shtml. Also see, Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian’s Regular Press Conference on June 17, 2021. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, last modified Jun. 17, 2021, last accessed Jul. 13, 2021. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/fyrbt_673021/t1884556.shtml.

that the Indo-Pacific strategy is one that goes against the current global trends of peace and development.⁶⁴ According to Tan, the Indo-Pacific strategy emphasizes military presence and military competition; it instigates countries to establish selective and exclusive alliances to engage in a "New Cold War" of confrontation blocs. Therefore, the Indo-Pacific strategy is essentially a zero-sum game that the U.S. deliberately promotes in pursuit of its own interests and unilateral absolute security. China believes that the Indo-Pacific strategy will only do harm to others and eventually lose the support, Tan said, as it heightens regional tensions and undermines world peace and stability.

Explaining the rationale behind the Indo-Pacific strategy, Wang Yong, Professor at School of International Studies and Director of the Center for International Political Economy at the Peking University, pointed out that the "Indo-Pacific concept" is built upon the "pivot to Asia" policy initiative proposed by Obama administration to counter China's rise.⁶⁵ The goal has always been to maintain the U.S. competitiveness vis-à-vis China in the region and secure America's predominance by bolstering ties with its security allies, Wang argued. Another scholar Xiao Jun suggested that by adjusting its strategic posture, particularly by drawing in new potential counterweights to China such as India, the U.S. will be able to navigate a changing geopolitical environment where China becomes a key strategic competitor.⁶⁶ This will then offer the U.S. an opportunity to fuel its security capabilities and expand its military partnerships. It will also help the U.S. alleviate the longstanding concern about whether it is still committed to, or capable of, remaining the region's dominant actor now that China is becoming more confident in asserting itself in international affairs.

64 Regular Press Conference of the Ministry of National Defense on May 27. Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China, last modified May. 27, 2021, last accessed Jul. 21, 2021. http://www.mod.gov.cn/jzhzt/2021-05/27/content_4886268.htm.

65 Forming cliques? The prospects for America's 'Indo-Pacific' Strategy are far from certain. The Beijing News, last modified Apr. 26, 2021, last accessed Jul. 13, 2021. <https://www.bjnews.com.cn/detail/161943241415609.html>.

66 Xiao Jun: Deconstructing the U.S.-India strategic partnership under the American 'Indo-Pacific' strategy, last modified Apr. 27, 2021, last accessed Jul. 13, 2021. <https://www.aisixiang.com/data/126261.html/>.

5. Conclusion

Indo-Pacific? Asia-Pacific? Geographic or geopolitical terminology? The dichotomy between the implications of the policy lexicons to describe the region has created much confusion to say the least in the regional order. On the one hand, the “Pivot to Asia” strategy by the Obama administration has shifted to a “free and open Indo-Pacific” narrative promoted by the Trump administration to outline strategic security as well as economic interests in the region, not to mention the efforts to contain China. The re-strengthening of the quadrilateral security dialogue has linked Washington’s allies, such as Australia, Japan, and India, to adopting and promoting this highly politicized and zero-sum logic of the “Indo-Pacific” concept. Reinforcing talks with the so-called allies has been pinnacle to the current Biden administration in order to regain and maintain a strong foothold in a region viewed by Washington as slowly falling under China’s influence.

Consequently, China, on the other hand, has responded to the containment strategy framing in a peaceful manner, curbing the possibility of confrontation with the Western powers and allies within the region. Without drawing distinct lines in the sand as part of a multilateral approach, Beijing has also increased its ties with ASEAN countries rather than taking steps that could have only deepened divisions in the region. The view of the ocean being a common and public space, not belonging to any person or nations, has countered the American-pushed narrative with a more cooperative and collective framing. The “Asia-Pacific” terminology utilized by Beijing seeks to soften the rhetoric, while shifting focus from geopolitical security competition to economic collaboration within the regional markets.



(Source: Online)

Breaking the concept of the “Indo-Pacific” and, therefore, groupings and divisions behind it is integral to China’s approach. China’s “Asia-Pacific” approach combined with the Belt and Road Initiative throughout many Southeast Asian countries has sparked further conversations and debates regarding the influence China has on the regional order. By defining Asia-Pacific as associated with national and cultural ties -- as the U.S. constantly refers to “shared values” with its allies -- rather than with oceanic universalities, further divisions are created.

Middle power countries like the EU and ASEAN members find themselves torn on which narrative to back, restraining from adopting either the China or U.S. narrative framework at the moment. Neutrality is becoming ever so tough.



(Source: china-cer.com.cn/)

In this light, the stressing point is that the confusion in narrative and semantics on the region must be addressed in order to even begin thinking of policies to implement within it. The nature and dynamics of the region must be further dissected and pacified in a less combative manner to understand the architecture of the region. The clear picture painted, though, remains that this region will become increasingly central to Sino-American relations and rivalry.

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