

The Indo-Pacific: A Survey of the Key Issues and Debates

A Literature Review by the King's College London Indo-Pacific Research Group

Created by Mauro Bonavita, Linganaden Murday & Tobias Scholz

Introduction

Geography and the ways that policy makers understand the regional setting in which their respective countries sit, is important because it affects their perception of security threats, interests, opportunities, and the security promises that they make towards neighbouring states (Bisley & Phillips, 2013, p.97). Although in reality regions are more than just geographical areas, at the basis they are 'geographical demarcations' that continuously evolve in light of changing geopolitical and socioeconomic conditions (Beeson & Wilson, 2018, p.78). As such, changes in the ways that states understand regions should be carefully studied. The Indo-Pacific is one of such cases and has been a key subject of discussion both in academic and policy circles. Countries like the US, Japan and the UK, amongst others, are using the concept 'as a policy symbol of regional engagement' (Haruko, 2020, p.1). It also has an impact on the 'mental map' of policy makers to the extent that it shapes the institutional nomenclature and architecture of the state (Medcalf, 2013). This is, for example, reflected in the situation where the US rebranded its Pacific Command into the Indo-Pacific Command. On that occasion, the US Defence Secretary underlined the reason for this change: '[i]n recognition of the increasing connectivity of the Indian and Pacific oceans' (BBC, 2018). In another instance, India created a whole new division in its Ministry of External Affairs dedicated to the Indo-Pacific (Pardesi, 2019, p.1).

However, defining the concept has been a challenge because of a general lack of agreement on several aspects including its geographical extension and aims. Nonetheless, despite its contested nature, indisputably, the Indo-Pacific is increasingly present in policy and academic discourses which creates the need for thorough analysis of its implication both at conceptual and practical levels. This literature review aims at showing the breadth and depth of the debate while highlighting the key areas of contemporary Indo-Pacific research. The review is divided into five main sections. The first one looks at the history and evolution of the concept over time. The second section analyses the implications of the Indo-Pacific for Indo-Pacific states whereas the third section undertakes a similar exercise but this time for non-Indo-Pacific states. Finally, the fourth section discusses the security implications of the Indo-Pacific, especially in terms of conflicts and cooperation stemming from the adoption of the Indo-Pacific concept.

Genealogy of the Concept: From Asia- Pacific to Indo-Pacific

At the basis the Indo-Pacific concept presumes that the two oceans are inseparable because ‘accelerating economic and security connections between the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean are creating a single strategic system’ (Medcalf, 2013). However, despite the increasing importance of geoeconomics at the end of the Cold War, the Indo-Pacific seems to be fuelled primarily by geopolitical concerns instead (Beeson and Wilson, 2018, p.82), although the geoeconomic side of the concept should not be underestimated (Bisley & Phillips, 2013, p.2). As Heydarian puts it: ‘[t]he Indo-Pacific is both a cauldron of geopolitical competition as well as economic dynamism. It’s where the future of the world will be determined’ (Heydarian, 2020, pp.2-3). In the policy making world, it is widely recognised that the former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is the key proponent of the concept of Indo-Pacific (*Ibid.*, p.5). Already, in 2007, during his first term as Prime Minister, in a speech in the Indian Parliament, Abe emphasised the existence of a ‘confluence of the two seas of the Indian and Pacific Oceans’(Abe, 2007). Today the concept has seeped into the policy making lexicon of many countries and has been the subject several academic works especially the fields of geopolitics and security studies.

It challenges the old principle of separating South Asia from East Asia or dividing the Asian continent into several blocks. In fact, just after the end of the Cold War, the Asian region was mainly known as the Asia- Pacific and included Southeast Asia, Northeast Asia and the selected states in the Pacific (Beeson &Wilson, 2018, p.80 and Mohan, 2012, p.212). The main actors in Asia-Pacific were China, US and Japan (Ikenberry& Mastanduno, 2003, p.2). The change into Indo-Pacific also injects a strong maritime content into that geographical space in recognition of the ‘sea as the main conduit for commerce and competition’ (Medcalf, 2013). In purely geographical terms the region is called Indo-Pacific as it has been extended to include first and foremost India, but some states take that western expansion further to include other regions like the Middle East and East Africa (Beeson &Wilson, 2018, p.80). Indeed, there is no agreed geographical delimitation of the Indo-Pacific both in academia and the policy making world. Heydarian’s recent book on the Indo-Pacific stop its westward expansion at the level of India (Heydarian, 2020). Others like Rumley and Doyle include the African continent as part of the Indo Pacific (Doyle& Rumley, 2019). The Obama’ administration in the US included East Africa but excluded China in the Indo-Pacific equation (*Ibid.*, p.73). In fact, there are two major positions on the delimitation of the Indo-Pacific, the ‘inclusionists’ who include China and Africa in the Indo-Pacific and the ‘exclusionists’ who would exclude them (*Ibid.*, p.7). The first Indo-Pacific forum that took place at the beginning of 2022, extends the geographical coverage till South Africa, thereby including small African states

like Mauritius, Seychelles and Madagascar which were key African participants in the forum (Fabricius, 2022). However, it is noteworthy that at this stage, it is not clear that African countries want to be included in the Indo-Pacific because of the fear that this might lead to situations where they are trapped in competition among great powers (*Ibid.*). Overall, as Doyle and Rumley observed, the Indo-Pacific is a 'hotly contested map-making phenomenon' (Doyle & Rumley, 2019, p.5).

Many scholars point out, at least by referring to official discourses, that the Indo-Pacific is a new geographical construct. In 2013, for instance, Medcalf observes that '[j]ust a decade ago, the term Indo-Pacific was heard almost nowhere' (Medcalf, 2013). For him the real moment when the Indo-Pacific was created was on the 14 December 2005 with the first East Asian Summit in Kuala Lumpur (*Ibid.*). This meeting symbolised the transition to a new reality characterised by the coming together of emerging states like China and India. In Indian foreign policy circles, the term has been used only since 2011 (Chacko, 2014, p.433). However, some scholars contest the novelty of the idea of the Indo-Pacific, tracing it back to around 1800, a time when the British Empire was undergoing a process of consolidation even if the term Indo-Pacific itself was not used (Pardesi, 2019, p.2). Thus, for Pardesi, except during the short period of the Cold War (1960s-1990), the Indo-Pacific has been 'Asia's strategic reality for the past two hundred years' as shown by the fact that already at that time the great powers evolving in the region (British India, Qing China, Imperial Japan and the United States) 'conceived this region as a single strategic system and implemented policies accordingly' (*Ibid.*). Heydarian even went as far as locating the Indo-Pacific in the voyages of Chinese admiral Zheng He. However, it is agreed that the official usage of the term Indo-Pacific, especially in diplomatic circles is very recent.

Several reasons have been put forward to justify the contemporary reimagining Asia from the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific. One of them is changes in the distribution of power in the world whereby now China and India are considered as great powers and are engaged in a strategic competition that is impacting the security situation in the two areas (Bisley & Phillips, 2013, p.99). Here it is not just about increasing Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean (IO), but also 'India's rising profile in the western Pacific' (Mohan, 2012, p.212). In that sense, the Indo-Pacific is seen as a reaction to the rise of China and the challenge that it poses to American hegemony. Similarly, in India, the adoption of the Indo-Pacific marks a shift from a 'nationalist' non-aligned nation to a 'pragmatic' country that aligns with other democratic countries like the US and Australia to deal with the rise of China (Chacko, 2014, pp434 and 445). Another important reason for the 'new' geographical construct is the increasing strategic value the Sea Lines of Communication in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific and the intimate connections between them (Bisley & Phillips, 2013, p.99 and Heydarian, 2020, p.7). This is fuelled by the Asia's reliance on resources emanating from

countries in the Indian Ocean for its energy requirements (Bisley& Phillips, 2013, p.99). It is worth quoting Bisley and Phillips in that regards:

The emergence of an Indian Ocean- centred resource and energy superhighway linking Asian manufacturing to global resource hubs is a powerful centripetal force; the SLOCs linking East Asia and the Indian Ocean region are often seen as inexorably pulling once discrete theatres into an integrated strategic space (Bisley& Phillips, 2013, p.100).

A third reason is the growing trade links among Asian countries (Bisley& Phillips, 2013, p.100).

However, the broadening that a movement to Indo-Pacific entails is controversial both in policymaking world and academia. Chinese policy makers, for instance, have portrayed the concept as a mere hot air (Heydarian, 2020, p.4). Referring to US strategic interests, other scholars like Bisley and Phillips have strong reservations about the Indo-Pacific because its huge geographical space carries the potential of forcing the US into new security issues and theatres that are beyond its means (Bisley& Phillips, 2013, pp. 96-97). As such, they recommend that the US instead continues to consider the Indian and Pacific Oceans as separate regions so as to be in a better position to focus on issues that are directly relevant to US interests. However, even proponents of the Indo-Pacific concept recognise the limits to the idea of the Indo-Pacific as one interconnected region because sub-regions still matter. As Medcalf remarks, it is ‘a super-region in which the sub-regions still matter’ with many of those subregions possessing their own ‘nasty strategic microclimates’ (Medcalf, 2013). Bisley and Phillips have emphasised the strong maritime content of Indo Pacific: ‘the Indo-Pacific is emphatically naval rather than continental’ (Bisley& Phillips, 2013, p.100). As such regret that it might distract from many land-based security issues. Nonetheless, others like Pardesi have challenged the view that it is mainly a maritime/naval concept. For Pardesi, the land aspect of the Indo-Pacific is equally important because of the strong nexus between land and sea (Pardesi, 2019, p.5 and Doyle& Rumley, 2019, p.5). In fact, the key naval powers evolving in the Indo-Pacific are also ‘formidable continental powers’ (Pardesi, 2019, pp.2 and 12). Doyle and Rumley even go to the extent of claiming that the Indo-Pacific also include communities and cultures (Doyle& Rumley, 2019, Chapter 2) - thereby diluting concerns about its overpowering maritime flavour.

It is also important to note that even states supporting the concept of Indo-Pacific have different ideas about what it entails. India, for instance, seems to reject a vision of the Indo-Pacific that will be dominated by a single power. Instead, India relies on democratic middle powers like Australia, Japan and South Korea to ‘police’ the region (Heydarian, 2020, p.9). Interestingly, India seems to exclude China from the Indo-Pacific security equation (*Ibid.*, p.10). By contrast, Indonesia envisions the Indo-Pacific that is more inclusive in the sense that it does not envisage an Indo-Pacific security

system without China (*Ibid.*). In other words, China is simply too big to ignore. The third vision of the Indo-Pacific is the US (at least in the eyes of the Trump's administration) US view of the need for a 'US-led Quadrilateral Alliance' composed of the US, India, Australia and Japan to counter the rise of China (*Ibid.*). This first and third visions are similar in the sense that China is perceived as a threat.

Preliminary Conclusions for the conceptual part

Overall, this conceptual section has highlighted the contested nature of Indo-Pacific concept. As a conclusion to this part of the literature review, it might be useful to reiterate some of the key questions and debates surrounding the concept of Indo-Pacific on which further research may be required. These include the following: How useful is the concept of Indo-Pacific for (a) policy makers (b) academics?; Is it really a new way of seeing the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean?; To what extent should be view the Indo-Pacific as a maritime concept?; What is the significance of a shift from Asia- Pacific to Indo-Pacific?; How do states in the Indo-Pacific understand the concept? What are the risks and benefits of thinking about the Indian and Pacific oceans as a continuum? What is the place of sub-regions in the Indo-Pacific? How do states juggle with other conceptions of regions that compete with the that of the Indo-Pacific?

External (European) Powers and the Indo-Pacific

The emergence of the Indo-Pacific is paralleled by its growing relevance for the rest of the world. For nation states and international private enterprises around the world, the new importance of the Indo-Pacific comes with both risks and opportunities. The absence of one defined regional order and the fear of a hegemonic China has motivated powers outside the Indo-Pacific to attempt tilting the geo-economic and geopolitical balance to their liking. This section reviews the approaches by key countries that are actively engaging the Indo-Pacific while being exogenous to the region. Recognizing the political quality of the Indo-Pacific concept requires a critical and contextual understanding of knowledge production. For this reason, country-respective research on the Indo-Pacific will be looked at in conjunction with the respective research institutions, capacities, and interests.

France

The French Republic is a unique European power in the Indo-Pacific as its own territory in the region means with approximately 1.65 million French citizens mainly living on the islands of French Polynesia, New Caledonia, and Réunion (Paskal, 2021, p. 7). With a strong geopolitical awareness, governmental interest, and funding for research projects, the research landscape in France has particularly witnessed an array of policy papers and analyses.

The term *indopacifique* is not new in French academia. As early as 1870 did French scientists reference the Indo-Pacific, yet at this time researchers mostly came from the natural sciences and used the term to describe the location of specific shells or specific fossils (de la Saussaye, 1870). While it took another 130 years for France to also consider the Indo-Pacific as a term in political geography and International Relations literature, the French interest in the region is informed and supported by its overseas territories. In the year 2000, French think tanker Eric Denécé (2000) published the book *Geostrategie de la mer de chine meridionale* in which he emphasized the central meaning of South-East Asia as a strategic gateway to the South China Sea. Considering the South China Sea as the region's greatest potential source of security risk, he argues that stabilizing ASEAN, the regional organization connecting the Indian with the Pacific Ocean, is central to regional security.

It is not surprising, that in 2019 France became the first European country to publish an Indo-Pacific Strategy. As both, the Ministry for the Armed Forces and the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs published a strategic assessment of the region, analysts agree that France is driven by security interests in the Indo-Pacific (Jaffrelot & Zérinini, 2021; Paskal, 2021). Heiduk and Wacker highlight that the French means to implement the strategy is mainly realized through a stronger engagement of ASEAN and a renewed emphasis on bilateral partnerships in the region (Heiduk & Wacker, 2020). The continuing notion of ASEAN-centrality that links French research from the year 2000 to today's political strategy is not uncontested. Acharya (2017) criticizes that ASEAN-centrality does not necessarily mean to assign a leadership function but to involuntarily impose the logics of great power competition on ASEAN countries.

The greatest publication effort vis-à-vis the French role in the Indo-Pacific has focused on individual strategic partnerships with countries in the region. Most prominently, these have analyzed trajectories, problems, and opportunities of bilateral or trilateral relations with Australia, India, and Japan. Naha (2021) studies the strategic consequences of Indo-French maritime partnership for the broader geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific. Rajagopalan (2020) makes a similar attempt for the Indo-French maritime cooperation. Pajon (2018) asks how the challenges that the Indo-Pacific presents can be an opportunity to leverage the strategic partnership between France and Japan. Taking the example of the Australia, France, and India trilateral partnership, Grare (2020) explores how trilaterals, minilaterals, and middle power coalitions can shape Indo-Pacific politics. Others, have analyzed France's role in the Indo-Pacific by choosing to have the Indo-Pacific order as the final explanandum (Baruah, 2020).

Germany

As France had been Europe's first mover in terms of its Indo-Pacific Strategy, the literature on Germany's activities in the Indo-Pacific takes a comparative perspective. Over the past two decades, Germany has

increasingly focused on China research, a development that is epitomized in the construction of MERICS¹, a think tank with more than 40 researchers that exclusively discusses the politics of China.

Some reasons have been identified to Germany's approach to the Indo-Pacific. Due to an anti-military tradition, Germany is believed as more cautious regarding its military presence in other parts of the world (Kliem, 2019). Choosing a different emphasis, Swistek (2021) implies that the mission of the Frigate Bayern to cross the Indo-Pacific is a way of diplomatic signaling that will cause a reaction and that this reaction matters for Germany's future strategic options. Following this line of thought, Germany's strategic thought in the region may not only be informed by immediate strategic interest but also by how it interprets the perceptions and reactions by Germany's partners in the region.

Since the release of Germany's Indo-Pazifik-Leitlinien (Die Bundesregierung, 2020), German think tanks have started seeing this as an opportunity to shift their publishing efforts from a China- and connectivity-centrism to geopolitics. Sakaki and Swistek (Sakaki & Swistek, 2022) assess the success of a German Frigate's mission in the Indo-Pacific. Other analyses have particularly focused on Germany's potentials in partnering with India, through increasing maritime cooperation (Kollakowski, 2021) or by innovating its developmental partnerships through trilateral formats (Wagner et al., 2022).

The European Union

Founded in 1992, the European Union (EU), the EU does not have the same kind of legacy that individual European powers are confronted with when facing the Indo-Pacific. An under-developed security provider but a normative and standard-setting power, the EU's primary focal point is to uphold the rules-based order (Mohan, 2020). The EU's own engagement of the Indo-Pacific concept thereby started when France and Germany had published their respective strategic document. After the EU published its own Indo-Pacific Strategy, different analysts compared and evaluated which nation's ideas were more dominant in crafting the EU's approach (Jaffrelot & Zérinini, 2021; Paskal, 2021). Besides, policy-oriented authors like Nováky (2022) saw an opportunity to suggest which action points the EU could derive from its strategy in the field of maritime security.

United Kingdom

Since it exited the the European Union, the United Kingdom (UK) has initiated several strategic programs that aimed at redefining its foreign policy identity. And while the UK has not published an Indo-Pacific Strategy yet, Patalano (2021) noted that a future UK policy towards the Indo-Pacific would be compatible with existing frameworks like the Global Britain initiative.

For the United Kingdom, the Indo-Pacific has mostly been conceptualized as a maritime domain. Empirically, this leads Patalano (2019) to argue that the Indo-Pacific region is a space through which global power and norms are redefined in the 21st century. In his analysis for the British think tank *Policy*

¹ For the website of MERICS, the Mercator Institute for China Studies, visit: <https://merics.org/en>.

Exchange, Patalano sees the Indo-Pacific as defined by great power competition and the rise of China. However, he further understands the Indo-Pacific as the central geopolitical theater which will define global arms and weaponry expenditures in upcoming years. Also emphasizing the relevance of naval power as the UK's premier diplomatic tool to create capabilities in the Indo-Pacific, Roy-Chaudhury points to the three bilateral partnerships with India, Japan, and China as those ones which should strategically reflect the core of the UK's approach.

Conclusion

Cornelis (2020) suggests that actor and strategy diversity in the Indo-Pacific can contribute to regional stability. Turning the argument around, this implies that too many actors could also contribute to power diffusion. The empirical problem for researchers is, that it is actually still too early to measure the impact of external actors in the entire Indo-Pacific. Notwithstanding its conceptual incoherencies, the literature on outside powers in the Indo-Pacific is slowly emerging while particularly Europe's middle powers are seeking to find ways to become more active in the region. As think tankers and policy analysts have been the drivers of the debate, the literature remains dominated by positivist and empirically guided approaches. Considering the regional and institutional background, the author of this section further cautions that the origins of research are far from diverse. In the case of this review on outside powers in the Indo-Pacific, almost all cited authors are either affiliated with European research and policy institutions or work with Asian institutions that are well known for their liberal views on globalization and trade. Further, the overall academic contribution remains questionable. Except for Garima Mohan's article in *Washington Quarterly* (2020), there seem to be no research articles which have been published by high quality journals that feature a double-blind peer review process. More than half of the works that appear on the searching platform *Google Scholar* do not have a single citation.

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