

Research group on the Indo-Pacific

In the course of the last years, the strategic concept of “Indo-Pacific” has emerged as a preponderant dimension in the sphere of International Relations between great powers, both in the Asian and Pacific geopolitical sphere, and in the strategic considerations of actors outside these dimensions. The deliberate choice of certain actors to rediscover this term, and to use it in the context of their international relations has created consequences that cannot be ignored, even for those international actors who remain cold or hostile to the conceptualisation of the Indo-Pacific, particularly the ideological interpretation that accompanies it. Since the use of this concept is a relatively recent phenomenon, it is necessary in the academic field to open a reflection on its meaning and implications in the regional and international context.

Starting from these general considerations, it is our desire to propose the constitution of a research group on the Indo-Pacific, which will systematically and thoroughly analyse this concept, both in its ideal elaboration and in its concrete implications. The aim of this research group is to produce academic research that is usable by UK and European policy makers, in order to better understand the geo-strategy of the Indo-Pacific, and China's position in it, the vision of individual resident actors in relation to the US-China strategic competition, their vision of the Indo-Pacific and the role of non-resident actors (essentially UK and Europeans) in it.

The group of academics, and researchers that constitute the initial team of this project, are representative of a multidisciplinary and sectoral approach, able to capture all the sensitivities of the topic and contribute to a comprehensive result. We have gathered around this project the contribution of academics and researchers from the Indian and Chinese Institutes, and a doctoral student from the African Leadership Centre, within the Global Institutes of the School of Global Affairs, who by research characteristics and studies promoted so far deal with actors directly involved in the Indo-Pacific, and are interested in developing structured research in this area. In addition, we can count on support by Centre for Grand Strategy at the Department of War Studies, which draws on its track record of research and policy impact on East Asian security issues and directly influenced the development of the UK Indo-Pacific concept as articulated in the government’s 2021 Integrated Review.

Both the Global Institutes and the Centre for Grand Strategy develop strong research on issues related to the strategic competition between the United States and China, and the implications of this phenomenon on global actors, particularly with regard to Japan, India and South Asia, and Southeast Asia. In this sense, this research group can count on the conjugation of regional study within the global strategic theoretical framework, in order to be able to study the relationships and points of view of the actors.

The Indo-Pacific: what strategy vis-à-vis China?

The notion of the Indo-Pacific has been at the heart of the diplomatic and military apparatus of many countries for several years. While Shinzo Abe's Japan showed the way as early as 2007, the United States was the first to give concrete expression to its Indo-Pacific strategy by renaming the United States Pacific Command, the United States Indo-Pacific Command in 2018. Soon after, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs created an Indo-Pacific desk in 2019. In Europe, France was one of the first countries to make the Indo-Pacific one of its geopolitical priorities, as reflected in Emmanuel Macron's May 2, 2018 speech at Garden Island (Sydney). Since then, Germany formulated its own vision for the zone in October 2020, followed shortly after by the Netherlands. These EU countries have all pushed Brussels to formulate its own Indo-Pacific strategy, which finally led to the publication of a summary document in September 2021. To this list, we must add the United Kingdom, which is also seeking to turn to Asia, particularly to cushion the consequences of Brexit and, of course, Australia, a country whose recent oscillations vis-à-vis the notion of the Indo-Pacific is revealing of the kind of uneasiness other countries are experiencing.

Despite some divergences in the concrete definitions of the Indo-Pacific by all these actors, the lowest common denominator connecting this simultaneous elaboration is the strategy of countries concerned about China's growing influence in the immense space that stretches from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean. This strategy generally consists of forming civil and/or military coalitions bringing together countries from the area and others that do not border these maritime spaces, but that have economic and strategic interests there - which is of course explained by the enormous weight that this meta-region has acquired economically following

the economic upswing of Asia, making the communication routes in the area essential for world trade.

Each of the terms used so far - or most of them - need to be qualified if we want to grasp the Indo-Pacific in all its complexity. First, the fact that it is a reaction to the rise of China is not equally clear to all actors. The United States is the most formal here: rediscovering some of the overtones of the Cold War, it readily evokes the need to "contain" China, a theme that Donald Trump had brought to a climax in some of his speeches, but to which the Biden administration was content to add nuances of form rather than substance, the Indo-Pacific having, moreover, been one of the first issues to be taken up by the new administration in 2021. This approach is now shared by Australia - where the fear of China has recently gone up a notch following several trade disputes - and the United Kingdom, the last pillar of the three-way coalition born in 2021, "AUKUS," on the occasion of the sale of U.S. nuclear-powered submarines to Australia.

Other countries do not point to China so explicitly when justifying their investment in the Indo-Pacific - even if it is often the proverbial "elephant in the room." First, some countries prefer to hold back on China from fears of economic, commercial or even military retaliation. This is the case not only for countries bordering China (in Southeast Asia and South Asia, including India), but also for countries that trade a lot with China, such as Germany and Japan. Even more than the AUKUS countries, these countries - and the European Union - invoke the need to protect the free movement of people and goods by respecting international law. Some of these states, mainly in Europe, have the declared objective of offering the countries of the zone "a third way" so that they do not have to choose between China and the United States.

If the attitude towards China introduces a first dichotomy, we can enrich the typology of the Indo-Pacific variants by looking at the means used. Firstly, one can contrast those who swear by multilateralism and rely on the UN system with those who invest in the creation of minilateral coalitions. To AUKUS, we must add the "Quad" which includes the United States, Australia, India and Japan. This quartet, initiated by Shinzo Abe in 2007, first took the form of a strategic dialogue and joint military manoeuvres before ceasing all activity after Australia withdrew, obviously fearful of upsetting China. The Quad was reactivated under a new Australian government and if Trump made it an important forum, Biden did not deny it at the

March 2021 meeting that resulted in the emergence of a "Quad Plus," a formula involving New Zealand, South Korea and Vietnam.

Among countries outside these minilateral arrangements, the structure of the partnerships can be confusing: without being part of any minilateral groupings, France and Germany not only do not rely on multilateral mechanisms alone, but also on certain countries or groups of countries in the Indo-Pacific. However, their points of reference are not necessarily the same, with France relying primarily on India, while Germany favours ASEAN (whose centrality the EU also emphasized in the document made public in September 2021 in which it outlines its policy towards the Indo-Pacific). France's special relationship with India is due in part to the French territories in the area (mainly Réunion and Mayotte, which are home to more than one million people) and the exclusive economic zones that surround them. The fact that France is a "resident power" in the Indian Ocean also leads it to participate in regional organizations of the Indian Ocean which, on their scale, are reminiscent of the minilateral logic but are not as spread as the Quad geographically, such as the Indian Ocean Commission and the Indian Ocean Rim Association which France joined in 2020. Moreover, France was part of a trilateral (and therefore minilateral) dialogue with India and Australia - until Canberra cancelled the contract for the purchase of French submarines in September 2021 (the future of this three-way dialogue is now compromised).

Furthermore, a distinction must be made between those actors who favour diplomatic dialogue aimed at enforcing compliance, economic and scientific cooperation, the development of "connectivity" and "people-to-people" exchanges to strengthen ties between Indo-Pacific partners, and those who add a military stage to this venture, considering that it is also a question of constructing a balance of power: while AUKUS was built on this logic following the sale of U.S. nuclear-powered submarines to Australia, France also makes military technology transfers (to India in particular) and joint manoeuvres (of naval forces in particular) the cornerstone of its Indo-Pacific strategy. The proliferation of collaboration between naval forces is today the most tangible sign of closer ties between countries in the zone, whether it is a question of large-scale military manoeuvres (involving aircraft carriers, for example) or the opening of naval bases to partners (those of France to the Indian navy was decided in 2018, for example). But also, other less spectacular decisions, such as the training of coast guards, are part of both civilian and military cooperation in the fight against piracy (see Operation Atalanta launched by the EU in the Indian Ocean) and illegal fishing. Moreover, purely civilian cooperation is

emerging in the context of what is known as the "blue economy", the objective of which is the development of fisheries resources. In the same spirit, numerous connectivity projects aimed at developing physical infrastructure (intended to counterbalance the port, road and rail achievements of the Road and Belt initiative) and digital networks are among the Indo-Pacific priorities of the EU and Japan.

The future of the Indo-Pacific as a new pillar of global geopolitics now depends on the ability of the actors to agree on the strategy to be followed. Not only are the differences (and even tensions) among Westerners palpable, as the dispute between France and the AUKUS countries over the submarine affair recently demonstrated, but the expectations of the countries in the zone vary greatly, especially between those who are ready to resist China and those for whom this is not an option – here ASEAN is split into two. Ultimately, Beijing's attitude is likely to play a key role: depending on whether China appears to be an existential threat to those countries that can still emancipate themselves from its influence, the Indo-Pacific will recruit (or not) more or less determined supporters.

Research Questions

In order to analyse all these aspects, we identified the following as the main research questions:

-What are the contrasting models of governance and regional community in the Indo-Pacific space? And how are these related to Chinese influence in the area?

-How are the mini-lateral and bilateral security pacts and organisation, resulting from the conceptualisation of the maritime dimension of the Indo-Pacific as a security area, responding to the perceived Chinese threat? What are the concrete effects of the action of these organisations in the Indo-Pacific? What role Navies, technology and trade play in this security dimension?

-To what extent, and how effectively, should the EU, UK and other external actors, engage China in their respective Indo-Pacific strategies?

-What is the impact of the policy push towards the Indo-Pacific for regional institutions like ASEAN? How have smaller states in Asia reacted to the Indo-Pacific agenda?