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RESEARCH DIVISION ASIA / BCAS 2019 | SESSION 1, NOVEMBER 2019

Many Players, Many Layers: The Indo-Pacific Long Game*

Conference draft, not for citation

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Introduction

The use of the term Indo-Pacific is no mere wordplay. Far from being an obscure account of words and maps, the narrative of the Indo-Pacific helps nations face one of the great international dilemmas of the 21st century: how can other countries respond to a strong and often coercive China without resorting to capitulation or conflict?

At a descriptive level, the Indo-Pacific is just a neutral name for a new and expansive map centred on maritime Asia. This conveys that the Pacific and Indian oceans are connecting through trade, infrastructure and diplomacy, now that the world's two most populous states, China and India, are rising together. Their economies, along with many others, rely on the sea lanes of the Indian Ocean to ship oil from the Middle East and Africa, and myriad other cargoes in both directions, along the world's vital commercial artery.

But the Indo-Pacific is also about drawing strength from vast space, and from solidarity among its many and diverse nations. The term recognises that both economic ties and strategic competition now encompass an expansive two-ocean region, due in large part to China's ascent, and that other countries must protect their interests through new partnerships across the blurring of old geographic boundaries. The Indo-Pacific concept recognises that multipolarity is part of the character of this emerging regional order, and offers part of the answer to its looming strategic challenges around managing China power.

* This paper is adapted from Chapter 1 of *Contest for the Indo-Pacific: Why China Won't Map the Future*, LaTrobe University Press, Melbourne, 2020 (forthcoming).

What's in a name?

Some see the Indo-Pacific as code for geopolitical agendas: America's bid to thwart China, India's play for greatness, Japan's plan to regain influence, Indonesia's search for leverage, Australia's alliance-building, Europe's excuse to gatecrash the Asian century. Certainly China feels risk and discomfort in the term. It hears Indo-Pacific as the rationale for, among other things, a strategy to contain its power through a 'quadrilateral' alliance of democracies – the United States, Japan, India, Australia. Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi has called the Indo-Pacific an 'attention-grabbing idea' that 'will dissipate like ocean foam'.[1] Yet what most makes the Indo-Pacific real is China's own behaviour – its expanding economic, political and military presence in the Indian Ocean, South Asia, the South Pacific, Africa and beyond.

In statecraft, mental maps matter.[2] Relations between states, competition or cooperation, involve a landscape of the mind. This defines each country's natural 'region' – what is on the map, what is off the map, and why. What a nation imagines on the map is a marker of what that nation considers important. This in turn shapes the decisions of leaders, the destiny of nations, strategy itself. How leaders define regions can affect their allocation of resources and attention; the ranking of friends and foes; who is invited and who is overlooked at the top tables of diplomacy; what gets talked about, what gets done, and what gets forgotten. A sense of shared geography or 'regionalism' can shape international cooperation and institutions, privileging some nations and diminishing others. For instance, the late 20th century notion of the Asia-Pacific and an East Asian hemisphere excluded India at the very time Asia's second most populous country was opening up and looking east.

Nations choose maps that help them simplify things, make sense of a complex reality, and above all serve their interests at a given time. For the moment, a Chinese description of much of the world as simply 'the Belt and Road' has become common parlance, though the meaning and purpose of this term is changeable, opaque and entwined with China's interests. For a long time, people have been accustomed to labels such as the Asia-Pacific, East Asia, South Asia and Southeast Asia, Europe, the North Atlantic, Eurasia and so on. Of an earlier set of politically loaded labels for Asia, the Far East and Near East are less recognised today, but the Middle East has endured.

These are all geographic constructs – invented terms that powerful states have at some time consecrated, with a self-centred political purpose.[3] Even Asia is not originally an Asian framework, but a term Europeans concocted and adjusted for their own reasons. Its imagined boundaries keep shifting. Asia began in ancient times as an Athenian label for everything east of Greece. In the 1820s, only half in jest, Austrian imperial statesman Metternich put the Europe–Asia boundary somewhere between Vienna and Budapest. In 2014, China hosted a conference that called for Asians alone to determine Asia's future, but with an interesting catch: its member states included the likes of Russia and Egypt, friends of China that are not categorically Asian, yet not Indonesia and Japan, unquestionably Asian countries but also powers that could make life difficult for China in the future.[4]

Like previous mental maps, the Indo-Pacific is in some ways artificial and contingent. But it suits the times: a 21st century of maritime connectivity and a multipolar geopolitics. Today we are seeing a contest of ideas in the mental maps of Asia being simplified down to the big two: China's Belt and Road versus the Indo-Pacific, championed in various forms by such countries as Japan, India, Australia, Indonesia, France and, as it gathers its wits,

the United States. Other nations are seeking to understand both concepts and identify how they can leverage, adjust, resist or evade them. The term Indo-Pacific has thus become code for certain decisions of consequence. In part, it is a message to a rising China that it cannot expect others to accept its self-image as the centre of the region and the world. It is also a signal that China and America are not the only two nations that count.

Beyond binary choices

Of course, simple binary choices are a tempting way to make sense of some of the more mind-numbing headline statistics about the sheer size of the Chinese and American economies. It is illuminating to play with some other numbers – statistics that embed the two leading powers in a system of many substantial nations, the Indo-Pacific. This complex reality includes many 'middle players': significant countries that are neither China nor the United States. Working together, the region's middle players can affect the balance of power, even assuming a diminished role for America.

Consider, for instance the possibility of a different quadrilateral: Japan, India, Indonesia and Australia. All four have serious differences with China and reasonable (and generally growing) convergences with each other when it comes to their national security. They happen to be champions of an emerging Indo-Pacific worldview. And they are hardly passive or lightweight nations. In 2018, the four had a combined population of 1.75 billion, a combined gross domestic product or GDP (measured by purchasing power parity or PPP terms) of US$21 trillion, and combined defence expenditure of US$147 billion. By contrast, the United States has a population of 327.4 million, a GDP of US$20.49 trillion and defence spending of US$649 billion. For its part, China's population is 1.39 billion, its economy US$25 trillion and its defence budget US$250 billion.[5] (This assumes, of course, that official Chinese statistics about economic growth and population size are not inflated, and there is reason for doubt.[6])

Project the numbers forward a generation, to mid-century, and the picture of middle players as potent balancers become starker still. In 2050, the four middle players are expected to have a combined population of 2.108 billion and a combined GDP (PPP) of an astounding $63.97 trillion. By then, America is estimated to have 379 million people and a GDP (PPP) of $34 trillion. China will have 1.402 billion people and a GDP of $58.45 trillion. Even just the big three of these Indo-Pacific partners – India, Japan and Indonesia – would together eclipse China in population and exceed it economically. By then their combined defence budgets could also be larger than that of the mighty People's Liberation Army. Include one or more other rising regional powers with their own China frictions, such as a Vietnam that may have about 120 million people and a top 20 global economy, and the numbers are stronger still. Even the combination of just two or three of these countries would give China pause. And all of this, for the sake of the argument, excludes any strategic role whatsoever for the United States west of Hawaii. If added to the enduring heft of the United States, the alignment of just a few middle players would outweigh the Chinese giant.

Of course, at one level this is all mere speculative extrapolation (albeit from existing numbers and assumed trends). But so is the widely propagated assertion that this unfolding century belongs to Beijing, that China will in every sense map the future. It is one thing to say that various coalitions of Indo-Pacific powers could balance China, provided they all stick together. In reality it would require breakthroughs in leadership, far-sightedness and

diplomacy for coalitions to harden into anything like formal alliances: arrangements that require mutual obligation among parties, underpinned by a willingness to take risks for one another. Moreover, it is difficult to see how loosely arrayed democracies can match authoritarian China's ability to mobilise its national resources. Still, the Indo-Pacific is at the early stages of a long game, in which there will be many plausible combinations of nations that, in the right circumstances, could find their own kind of strength in numbers.[7]

There may be subtle differences in what each country means by the Indo-Pacific label, but for nations like Australia, Japan, India and Indonesia, the Indo-Pacific is a way to navigate turbulence in Asian power politics in which Xi Jinping's China is disruptive, Donald Trump's America dysfunctional, and other countries are desperate to preserve what they can of peace, prosperity and sovereignty. And it does this by breaking through the late 20th century mental boundary that separated the Pacific and Indian oceans, ossified into the once-useful but now outmoded idea of the Asia-Pacific.

In recent years, a diplomatic domino effect has taken hold, with many governments suddenly referring to the Indo-Pacific, even while China warned them away from such language. Indian Prime Minister Modi made it the animating theme of his keynote speech at an Asia security summit in Singapore in 2018.[8] And in June 2019, the entire ten countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) agreed to an Indo-Pacific outlook on their relations with an enlarged region.[9] This confirms the Indo-Pacific is not an idea alien to Asia: indeed, it gives the middle players of ASEAN more centrality than they had in the past Asia-Pacific era, or than they would have in a world defined only by Beijing's Belt and Road.

Game of many

In the contemporary Indo-Pacific moment, nations are interacting in a great game with multiple participants and dimensions. China's expanding economic, military, and diplomatic activity in the Indian Ocean marks an emerging Indo-Pacific strategic system, where the actions and interests of one powerful state in one part of the region affect the interests and actions of others. The Indo-Pacific power narrative intersects the interests of at least four major countries – China, India, Japan, and the United States – as well as many other players, including Australia, Indonesia and the other Southeast Asian nations, South Korea and more distant stakeholders, not least in Europe. Russia, too, is making its presence felt. The Indo-Pacific is a multipolar system, in which the fate of regional order, or disorder, will not be determined by one or even two powers – the United States and China – but by the interests and agency of many.

The power contest in the region has often been likened to the Great Game between imperial Britain and Russia in the 19th century. This time, though, there are more than two players. Academic theories and games of strategy help explain how nations interact when interests differ. But what if each is playing a different game? And if there is cooperation alongside competition? After all, there may be very different drivers – combinations of interests, values, identity – behind each state's actions in the region. Beyond narrow ideas about defence and security, these may involve nationalism, history, political legitimacy and of course economics, including the quest for resources and sustainability in a threatened natural environment.

For China, in particular, there is a troubling thread between the domestic and the international. For Xi Jinping and the Communist Party to maintain their grip on total power, they have found it necessary to raise the Chinese people's expectations that their nation will be great abroad, and will successfully handle any resistance. Yet China's expansive policies mean that its problems overseas are accumulating, and the chances of a major misstep are thus increasing. In turn, this puts Xi and the Communist Party at particular risk, because China alone among the great powers has staked much of the legitimacy of its entire political system on success abroad. When things go wrong, the whole Chinese system could suffer grievously – especially if crises of security, politics and economics intersect in ways hard to predict and impossible to manage.

Interaction between states occurs across many dimensions. Compounding the complexity of a multipolar region, a game with many players, is the reality that this is also a puzzle with many layers. Four stand out: economics (perhaps better termed geoeconomics), military force, diplomacy and a clash of national narratives. These blend in patterns of comprehensive competition – combined with elements of cooperation – that will shape the future.

Economics, especially demand for energy, propelled the rise of the modern Indo-Pacific. China, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Southeast Asia, Australia and India all depend acutely on the Indian Ocean sea lanes for energy and thus prosperity and security. Seaborne commerce is likewise making this maritime highway – carrying at least two-thirds of the world's oil and a third of the world's bulk cargo – the centre of gravity for the global economy. There are uncertainties about whether international supply and manufacturing chains will extend to South Asia, or remain more Asia-Pacific in character, or tangle and snap in new ways with trends in automation and 'on-shoring' and the prospect of a disruptive 'decoupling' of industrial interdependence between America and China.

There is also a race of connectivity. China and others are competing to build ports, road, rail, electricity and communications infrastructure to bind Asia and connect it with Africa, Europe and the Pacific. This extends to small island states. Globally, meanwhile, the contest is on for the commanding heights of technology: artificial intelligence, quantum computing and 5G telecommunications. Contrary to turn-of-the-century dreams of globalisation, economic interdependence is no longer just about breaking down borders and letting all states rise together: it has become a tool of power and influence, captured in the newly popular catch-all of 'geoeconomics'.[10] This represents competition by states for power advantages through economics rather than military force.[11]

China's Belt and Road spree of loans and infrastructure has become a geoeconomic powerplay, a strategy for pre-eminence.[12] The 'Road' is the Indo-Pacific with Chinese characteristics, a bid to extend influence into the Indian Ocean and the South Pacific. The 'Belt' of overland connectivity through Eurasia is of secondary importance, given that transport of bulk goods and energy by sea will remain cheaper and arguably no riskier – albeit slower – than by land. China needs sea transportation for 90 percent or more of its imported oil, iron ore, copper and coal.[13] The strategic impacts of the Belt and Road warrant close attention, including a new colonialism – accidental or deliberate – in which Chinese coercion, political influence and security presence become a consequence of connectivity. This does not mean that all such activity began as a grand strategy or – faced with complex local politics – that it will necessarily succeed. For instance, geographically pivotal places like Sri Lanka and Malaysia remain in play.[14]

As with the European empires of old, it is clear that the flag follows trade, and that security shadows economics, along with risks of conflict. The Indo-Pacific has a starkly military dimension. A pivotal moment has been China's turn to the sea. Its navy is expanding rapidly, in line with a 2015 proclamation by President, Communist Party General Secretary, military chief and core leader Xi Jinping, that the 'traditional mentality that land outweighs sea must be abandoned' when it comes to protecting China's interests. Instead, the new Chinese strategy is about 'offshore waters defence' and 'open-seas protection': euphemisms for deploying force in distant waters.[15] A massive shipbuilding program has been underway for years. Aircraft carriers are being commissioned, not primarily to patrol China's proximate waters or even the South China Sea, but to show force on the open ocean. The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) showed up in the Indian Ocean with three warships to counter Somali piracy at the start of 2009, and has never left. For the first time since the voyages of Admiral Zheng He in the 1400s, China is an Indian Ocean power. This time, instead of sailing ships, it has destroyers, marines and submarines. These conduct exercises peaceful and warlike, backed by partnerships, port access rights and the Chinese military's first overseas base. This time China plans to stay.

China is not alone. It has far-flung interests to protect and is hardly the only external power to fly the flag in Indian Ocean waters. The United States has long operated there, including at its base on the contentious UK possession of Diego Garcia. Japan opened a base at Djibouti before China did. European powers have been forth and back and forth again since the days of Vasco da Gama. This century, almost every ocean-going navy, from Russia to Singapore, has sent forces to protect commerce from Somali-based pirates, a rationale for China's mission. The world's navies are converging not only west of the Malacca Strait. Indian, American and Japanese warships practise together from the Bay of Bengal to the Western Pacific. Almost every major navy joins Australia to train in waters north of Darwin. As China militarises artificial islands in the South China Sea, fleets both commercial and military from across the globe exercise their international legal rights by traversing this shared highway at the heart of the Indo-Pacific.

Militaries are modernising and deploying across the region. The trend is towards 'power projection': a capacity to fight far away, across the seas. Nearly all the region's powers are arming and making ready, but for what? Is it mainly about cooperation, on shared concerns like terrorism, piracy, illegal fishing, disaster relief in an age of climate change, search and rescue, peacekeeping, stabilisation of fragile states, evacuations of citizens from trouble spots? Is it to police the sea lanes, protect shipments of energy and commerce, and uphold international law? Or to deter, coerce, resist and, if need be, fight other nations in new wars, cold or hot? Underlying the military build-up is a gathering atmosphere of suspicion. No nation may plan outright aggression, but intentions are opaque. China does not take America at its word – and America, Japan, India, Australia and Vietnam, among others, are deeply wary of China's.

All this armed mistrust would seem an urgent call for greater attention to diplomacy, rules and respect in keeping the peace. The architecture of peace in the Indo-Pacific is woefully flimsy, and doubles as another arena for nations to compete for influence. The region's multilateral diplomacy sometimes appears to be little more than an acrimony of acronyms, doing little in a practical sense to build cooperation or reduce risks of conflict. So-called confidence-building measures are in short supply and little honoured.

The action is behind the scenes, with China, the United States and others competing to shape agendas. The regular diplomacy in the region remains bilateral: nations dealing

with others one on one. This favours the strong. But another trend is about safety in numbers. That brings us back to middle players like Australia, India, Japan and Indonesia, building diplomatic ballast by strengthening their bonds with each other. A new diplomacy, minilateralism, is gaining ground, where small groups of three or more countries form flexible coalitions based on shared interests, values, capability and willingness to get things done. The most controversial is the quadrilateral dialogue of the United States, Japan, India and Australia, which China sees as an embryonic alliance to counter its rise. But quietly and with more impact, a web of three-sided coalitions is arising: US–India–Japan; India–Japan–Australia; Australia–India–Indonesia; even a so-called 'Indo-Pacific axis' of Australia, India and France.

Managing mistrust

Critical questions remain. Can some patchwork of diplomatic arrangements truly keep the peace? Will new partners stand by each other if one finds itself in confrontation with China? And how much difference can middle powers really make when vital interests are at stake?

The answer is partly about perception, for there is another level of contestation abroad – a struggle to shape perceptions, and therefore reality. Between Beijing and Washington, the many players in the middle are watching each others' responses to Chinese strength and assertiveness. The Indo-Pacific power competition includes efforts to shape attitudes and narratives among populations and decision-makers: a classic way to win without fighting. There is now a perpetual fight around perceptions and propaganda, a battle of the narratives. Warnings of 'political warfare' are sounded.[16] The reinvention of law or 'lawfare' plays its part. So does the reinvention of history. Just as the world is now fixated on the dangers of 'fake news', there are subtler risks from 'fake olds' – history fabricated to privilege one nation's interests over others.

China is combining the 'soft power' of persuasion with the 'sharp power' of internal political interference, to neutralise opposition and reconfigure the Indo-Pacific game board, from Australia to Sri Lanka, Pakistan to the Pacific island states.[17] The narrative battle is no longer all going China's way. But there are risks in how America and others respond. Too blunt a pushback can be self-defeating, as one American official discovered when she likened competition with China to a 'clash of civilisations' in disturbingly cultural, even racial, terms. The reality is more like a clash of political systems, where Washington needs to maintain a diverse set of friends, not alienate them.[18]

Other countries are joining the 'soft power' race, with some like Japan, the United States and Australia promoting their own versions of the Indo-Pacific as an alternative to the Belt and Road. Universities, think tanks and media organisations can no longer imagine themselves detached observers and interpreters. Along with digital technologies, they have rapidly become part of the story: both terrain and instruments of strategic competition. Concerns about foreign interference, propaganda and espionage have resurfaced in new forms, and no longer sound like warmed-up Cold War paranoia. In recent years, a reality check on Chinese Communist Party influence in Australia, combined with revelations of Russian and Chinese activity in the United States, has set the tone for the wider global and regional debate. Future strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific will not be confined to seas and contested international boundaries, but will play out also on the home front.

So what do the past and present tell us about the risks and opportunities ahead? To understand plausible futures for the Indo-Pacific, it is necessary to consider the choices nations can make, revolving around the question of how to manage coercion without it ending in conflict or capitulation. Relations between nations are a continuum from cooperation at one end, through degrees of coexistence, competition and confrontation, all the way to conflict, including outright war. Presently the Indo-Pacific dynamic is somewhere at the competition point on the spectrum, with rising risks of confrontation or conflict.

China and the United States have entered a state of comprehensive struggle, amounting to full-spectrum rivalry. The situation could deteriorate further still, whether through miscalculation or coercion. There have long been four well-known flashpoints in East Asia: Taiwan, the South China Sea, the East China Sea and the Korean Peninsula.[19] But beyond these, there are now signs that conflict is increasingly conceivable in the wider Indo-Pacific. America is only one of China's potential adversaries: China–India and China–Japan relations will remain fraught and fragile. The flashpoints may not even be geographic, but could involve interventions in the information realm, such as cyber intrusions or disputes over freedom of expression. A conflict that begins in East Asia could escalate across the region, for instance through distant naval blockades, cyber attacks, economic sabotage, the disabling of nations' critical infrastructure and the pre-emptive destruction of communications networks, including in space. Future US–China crises could play out in the Indian Ocean and the South Pacific.

The outcome of even a limited conflict in the Indo-Pacific is impossible to predict. Reasons include new technologies, economic connectedness, mutual vulnerability and random factors of decision and surprise. Ultimately, the catastrophic risks from nuclear weapons – right up to their actual use – cannot be discounted. But even if conflict ceased at a lower threshold, damage could be severe, including to the stability of states and the foundations of global prosperity and order. Fortunately, no state in the Indo-Pacific seeks war, and most tensions can be managed by other means. But fully fledged cooperation and conflict resolution are impossible under conditions of mistrust.

What can be done? It is difficult to imagine the region's powers accepting new diplomatic institutions and treaties or a meaningful role for the United Nations in addressing their differences. Coexistence is the most reasonable expectation, and is an essential starting point for any loftier ambitions of cooperation. But it may take an international near-death experience – the 21st century Indo-Pacific equivalent of the Cuban missile crisis – to compel governments to get serious about the risk-reduction measures needed to keep the peace. Such a crisis could finally spook nations into making proper use of the existing but under-appreciated 'architecture' of rules and communication channels. Such crisis-management hotlines, along with arms control agreements and diplomatic summits, were used better in the Cold War because the gravity of the stakes was so clear. Scope also remains for today's Indo-Pacific governments to get much more serious about leveraging cooperation against common threats – like climate change, natural disasters, resource depletion, transnational crime, piracy and terrorism. This in turn could improve coordination and transparency in managing strategic mistrust.

But where to begin? And in a complex diplomatic impasse, how is it possible to choreograph compromise? Most governments now understand that they are struggling with a new regional security landscape – the Indo-Pacific – but lack a plan joining up the parts of the puzzle: geoeconomics, security, diplomacy and the domestic stage. The race is on for

each nation to craft a comprehensive strategy. Progress is uneven. China's Belt and Road is the most advanced. Japan and the United States have their versions of a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific'. India, Australia and Indonesia are working on their own pragmatic Indo-Pacific blueprints. Australia's 2017 foreign policy white paper, in particular, sketches the contours of a strategy for the emerging era, proposing a whole-of-nation response to regional uncertainty.[20] This is much easier said than done.

In this multipolar age, nations will not succeed in securing their interests if they pursue strategies in isolation. This includes the strongest powers, the United States and China. The region is too vast and complex for any country to protect its interests alone. There will be a premium on partnerships. An understanding of the special nature of the Indo-Pacific region – including its scale and diversity – helps identify the elements of a strategy for navigating likely decades of friction. These include a calibrated mix of diplomacy, development and deterrence, including contingency planning.

There is a need for sustained activism and solidarity among middle players like Australia, India, Japan, Indonesia, and their partners in Southeast Asia and Europe, to show the way for an American strategy that is competitive but not confrontational, confident but not complacent. In dealing with Chinese power, old notions of 'accommodation' and 'containment' need to be discarded in favour of 'incorporation' or 'conditional engagement'. This would be about involving China as a legitimate great power based on mutual adjustment and mutual respect. There is nothing intrinsic about the Indo-Pacific idea that it should exclude China or, to use an outdated and misused Cold War term, 'contain' it. China is by definition a major player in such a region, and recognising this means acknowledging, for instance, its right to play a security role in the Indian Ocean.

It is true that the Indo-Pacific idea dilutes and absorbs Chinese influence. That is part of the point. Yet this is not about shutting China out of its own extended region, but rather incorporating it in one that is large and multipolar. Others need to adjust to China and China needs to adjust to them, especially Asia's large middle players. Of course China has a major and rightful place, a status that is respected and prominent – just not dominant. A 'sphere of influence' approach, in which China is allowed to control East Asia while India in turn is allowed to dominate the Indian Ocean, will simply not work: China's seaborne oil dependence, and the security, economic and diaspora footprint of its Belt and Road, make it too late for that.[21] At the same time, given China's great strategic weight and temptations towards hegemony, the Indo-Pacific idea is empowering for other countries, encouraging them to build new and defensive partnerships across outdated geographic boundaries.

But such moderation of Chinese power will likely fail if middle powers do not seek solidarity but instead are cowed by the observation that there is little each can do to influence China on its own. Much will depend on how nations choose to use the current window of pan-regional awareness. For example, strategic solidarity and alliances have traditionally applied only to situations of armed conflict. But what if Indo-Pacific principles such as respect for rules and sovereignty began to translate into new forms of collective and non-military resistance to maritime bullying or economic coercion? Or if new region-wide standards for infrastructure were to limit the misuse of such investments for hostile purposes? Whatever happens, nations need to build their resilience and harness all elements of their power for a long phase of contestation. This requires not only attention to defence and diplomacy, but also bridging policy divides between economics and security. Governments will have to become more direct with civil society and business interests about

what is at stake: the fact that no nation can hide from the world, that international tensions cannot be wished away and will touch everyday life.

A course can be charted between naivety and fatalism. There is no guarantee this will work. Still, the very nature of the Indo-Pacific – its connected vastness, its multipolarity as a game with many players – is part of the answer. This is a region too big and diverse for hegemony. It is made for multipolarity and creative new partnerships across collapsed boundaries. Its distances and riches and scattered strategic territories may tempt imperial overstretch – but correct it too.

Code for solidarity

The very speed with which Indo-Pacific thinking has arisen fuels doubts about its impact and staying power. After all, the countries that champion the term do not seem to agree precisely on what it means. America and Japan talk about 'free and open', with Indonesia and India emphasising inclusiveness and connectivity, and Australia somewhere in between. This may be a sign of deeper differences over how to respond to Chinese power and US–China tensions. For Americans, the Indo-Pacific is a signal that they are not leaving Asia and – even in spite of Trump – still have many friends there. For others it is a reminder that this region includes many nations – representing billions of people – who are neither Chinese nor American, and that their views matter too.

Yet there is an underlying solidarity. All countries advocating the Indo-Pacific are using it to signpost what they want: economic connectivity that does not translate interdependence into one country's exploitation; rules and respect for sovereignty; the avoidance of force or coercion in resolving international differences. The question is whether this solidarity will translate into collective action and mutual protection if confrontation comes.

The Indo-Pacific is a work in progress. In keeping with the spirit of diplomacy, it makes a virtue of ambiguity: serving both as an objective description of geopolitical circumstances and the basis for a strategy. That is but one of its useful dualities, and Asian statecraft has long been comfortable with duality – a unity composed of differences, like the yin and the yang of Chinese philosophy. Indeed, the Indo-Pacific encompasses multiple dualities, the reconciliation of contrasting aspects within one idea. It is both inclusive and exclusive: it is about incorporating Chinese interests into a regional order where the rights of others are respected; but it is also about counterbalancing Chinese power when those rights are not. It is both economic and strategic: it has economic origins but profoundly strategic consequences.

The Indo-Pacific's boundaries are fluid – it is, after all, a maritime place – and this helps explain why various countries define it differently (and why that is no great problem). For example, is coastal east Africa part of the Indo-Pacific or not? Perhaps the answer depends on how the interests of key Indo-Pacific powers are engaged in African affairs. But the region's core is clear: the sea lanes of maritime Southeast Asia. As for the periphery, it is defined by connections, not borders. This is consonant with the ancient Asian concept of the mandala, originating from Hindu cosmology, which with many variations defined the universe according to circles and a central point. This informed ancient statecraft in India and Southeast Asia: polities were defined by their centre, not their boundaries. In the mandala model, as opposed to the traditional 'middle kingdom' worldview of China, centrality does not automatically bestow superiority. Rather, the model recognises a world of many

places, many islands, each with their own qualities. In modern parlance, this equates to multipolarity, equal sovereignty and mutual respect – many belts and many roads.

[1] Bill Birtles, 'China mocks Australia over "Indo-Pacific" concept it says will "dissipate",' ABC News, 8 March 2018. Some analysts suggest China's response to the Indo-Pacific is merely 'nonchalance', although if this were the case then perhaps China's official position would be either to ignore the construct or to accept it as harmless. Feng Zhang, 'China's curious nonchalance towards the Indo-Pacific', *Survival*, Vol. 61, No. 3, 2019.

[2] Robert Kaplan, 'Center stage for the 21st century: power plays in the Indian Ocean', *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 2009).

[3] A similar point is made by Amitav Acharya, *The End of American World Order*, Polity Press, London, 2014, p. 82.

[4] Mu Chunshan, 'What is CICA (and why does China care about it)?', *The Diplomat*, 17 May 2014.

[5] Data combined from multiple sources, including: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 'World Population Prospects 2019', Medium fertility variant; PricewaterhouseCoopers, 'The long view: how will the global economic order change by 2050?', February 2017, pp. 23, 68; Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 'Military expenditure by country, in constant 2017 US$ 1988–2018'.

[6] There is much debate over the reliability of official Chinese data. On possible fabrication of economic statistics, see Wei Chen et al., 'A forensic examination of China's national accounts', Brookings Papers on Economic Activity, 2019. On population size, see Yi Fuxian, 'China's population numbers are almost certainly inflated to hide the harmful legacy of its family planning policy', *South China Morning Post*, 20 July 2019.

[7] This section builds on an analysis originally provided in Rory Medcalf and Raja C. Mohan, 'Responding to Indo-Pacific rivalry: Australia, India and middle power coalitions', Lowy Institute Analysis, 2014.

[8] Narendra Modi, keynote address at the Shangri-La Dialogue, Singapore, 1 June 2018.

[9] 'ASEAN outlook on the Indo-Pacific', Association of Southeast Asian Nations, 23 June 2019; Melissa Conley Tyler, 'The Indo-Pacific is the new Asia', *The Interpreter* (Lowy Institute blog), 28 June 2019.

[10] Anthea Roberts, Henrique Choer Moraes and Victor Ferguson, 'The geoeconomic world order', *Lawfare* blog, 19 November 2018.

[11] Robert D. Blackwill and Jennifer M. Harris, *War by Other Means: Geoeconomics and Statecraft*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, 2016, p. 20.

[12] As argued also in Bruno Maçães, *Belt and Road: A Chinese World Order*, Hurst and Company, London, 2018.

[13] Cuiping Zhu, *India's Ocean: Can China and India Coexist?* Springer/Social Sciences Academic Press, Singapore, 2018, pp. 142-143.

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