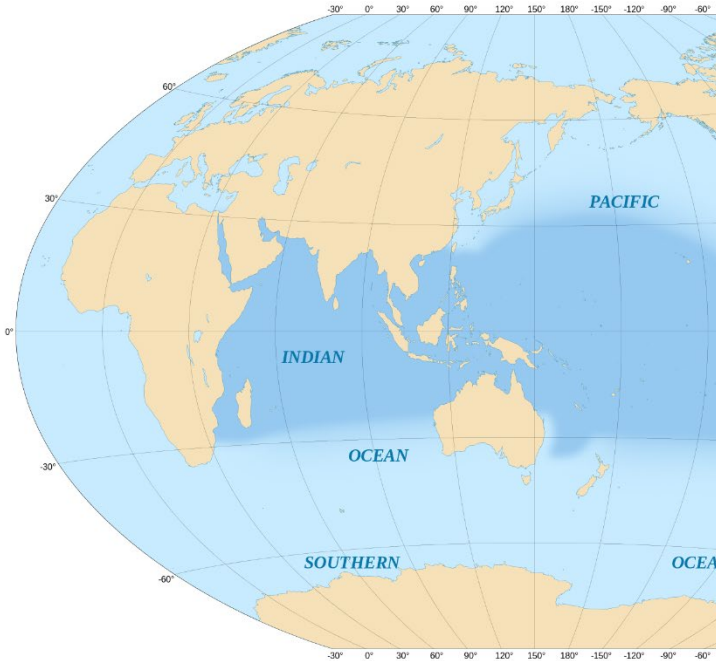


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Introduction

A Rules-Based Order for the Indo-Pacific?

Dr. Peter Harris, editor



It is the policy of the United States government to ensure that the Indo-Pacific megaregion remains “free and open.” In no small part, this vision rests upon the wager that a single rules-based order can exist from the western reaches of the Indian Ocean to the vast expanses of the Asia-Pacific. However, developing and enforcing a cohesive international rulebook for the Indo-Pacific will be far from simple. For the United States and its allies, the urgent need to

cement a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific is driven, at least in part, by anxiety surrounding the rise of China—yet this ongoing movement in the balance of power is also a major reason for why a stable rules-based system will be difficult to maintain. Then there is the question of legitimacy. It is possible for a rules-based system to be truly fair and inclusive, or does international order inevitably reflect the interests of some more than others? Finally, it is not assured that America’s presence in the Indo-Pacific will continue to be welcomed by regional governments.

This, the first “Indo-Pacific Perspectives” roundtable from the *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, will offer some answers to these complex geopolitical (and “geolegal”) questions. As the name suggests, this new series of roundtables will showcase viewpoints from across the Indo-Pacific megaregion (and sometimes beyond). The goal is to facilitate a dialogue between academics and policy practitioners that will be of great interest—and, we hope, considerable use—to an international cast of scholars and decision makers whose work focuses on the Indo-Pacific. In this inaugural roundtable, the participants hail from the United States, United Kingdom, Singapore, India,

and Indonesia. They are academics, expert analysts, and seasoned policy advisers. Tasked with shedding light on the concept of a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific, they have provided a range of perspectives to clarify just how fraught and contentious such an order-building (and order-defending) project will be.

The roundtable begins with Nilanthy Samaranyake's keen analysis of US foreign policy toward the Indo-Pacific. She points out that, despite the inclusive rhetoric and phraseology of a "free and open Indo-Pacific," America's leaders sometimes betray a preoccupation with the Asia-Pacific at the expense of the Indian Ocean. For example, US officials sometimes discuss the entire Indo-Pacific region as bedeviled by maritime boundary disputes, whereas such disagreements are much more prominent and consequential in the Asia-Pacific than the Indian Ocean. If states from India to Japan are to remain committed to the idea of belonging to a single Indo-Pacific region, it will be important to clarify the interests that these states are supposed to share in common with one another.

Benjamin Ho turns to analyze the foreign-policy motivations of China, America's supposed rival in the Indo-Pacific and another

potential driver of a rules-based system for the region. According to Ho, China's leaders are open to the broad concept of a rules-based international order, even if they (unsurprisingly) tend to support a different configuration of rules than that put forward by the United States. One of Ho's major insights is that Chinese leaders desire a rules-based international system that will help them to ward off external threats to *domestic* security. This is the reverse of how international order is discussed in the West—that is, as a straitjacket to prevent domestic actors from upending *international* security.

Laura Southgate agrees that China has an interest in using international rules as tools to serve its national interests—and, moreover, that its growing power means that Beijing must be taken seriously as a rule-shaper in the region. This is true whether China chooses to be an active "maker" of new rules for the Indo-Pacific or whether it is expected to be a mere "taker" of rules made by others. Simply put, China is so powerful, and its interests are so expansive, that China's willingness to comply with rules will be a decisive factor in determining the success of any rule-based order. Southgate provides a case study of the United Nations Convention on the Law of

the Sea—to wit, Beijing’s summary rejection of a 2016 ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration that held some of China’s maritime claims in the South China Sea to be incompatible with international law—to illustrate the central importance of China to the success of rules old and new.

Kei Koga offers a complementary analysis of Japanese foreign policy toward the Indo-Pacific. He points out Japan’s leaders were among the first to articulate the existence of a cohesive Indo-Pacific space. Koga points to the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (“Quad”) as Japan’s primary means of operationalizing and institutionalizing its commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific, but makes the important observation that Japan and the other Quad members (Australia, India, and the United States) cannot act imperiously toward smaller regional actors. Koga emphasizes the special importance of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), noting that Southeast Asia is the geographical center of the Indo-Pacific. Without the endorsement of ASEAN, Japan’s leaders seem to have concluded, there can be no hope of maintaining a rules-based order to unite the Western Pacific and Indian Ocean. Such international-level considerations have

interacted with domestic politics to shape Japanese policy toward order-building, Koga argues.

Titli Basu uses her contribution to bring India into the frame. Basu makes the incisive point that the coming multipolar world will be anchored in a multipolar Asia; how the competing powers of the Indo-Pacific can manage to live alongside one another will, in no small measure, determine the fate of global governance and security. Basu argues that India must be considered a major player in the Indo-Pacific (and, by extension, the rest of the world), but she insists that India should not be regarded as a mere “balancer.” This is something that US analysts are sometimes guilty of—valuing India in geopolitical terms as a bulwark against Chinese expansion, but not taking the time to consider how Delhi intends to exert itself as a shaper of regional and global order in its own right.

Ngaibiakching provides a sweeping analysis of the issues facing Indo-Pacific nations, from the problem of institutionalizing regional order to the imperative of avoiding a new “Cold War” between the United States and China. She echoes both Southgate and Basu in observing the importance of power as a foundation for rule making; agrees with Koga that small and middle

powers will play a critical role in shaping the emerging Indo-Pacific order; and makes the forceful argument that multipolarity will not be kind to the Indo-Pacific if it is not accompanied by a firm commitment to multilateralism on behalf of the region's major powers.

Finally, Dewi Fortuna Anwar offers her unique perspective as not just an eminent academician but also a former policy maker in the Indonesian government. Her description of ASEAN's successes at order-building, rulemaking, and shared regional governance is another powerful reminder that the Indo-Pacific zone is far from monolithic. Even if there is ample reason to treat the Indo-Pacific as a single megaregion, this must surely be done while paying careful attention to variation at the sub-regional level.

What future is there for a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific? It depends. Great powers like the United States, India, and China; middle and smaller powers like Australia, Japan, and Indonesia; regional blocs like ASEAN—all of these actors will have an impact upon the development of rules for the region. The contributions to this roundtable shed valuable light on the interests and decision-making processes of some of the parties involved. They suggest that a

rules-based order from the Persian Gulf to Northeast Asia is possible, and perhaps even inevitable, but still as yet undetermined. ■

Dr. Peter Harris

Dr. Harris is an assistant professor of political science at Colorado State University, where his teaching and research focus on international security, international relations theory, and US foreign policy. He serves as the editor for the *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs'* new "Indo-Pacific Perspectives" series. Dr. Harris has two main research projects underway: one focusing on great-power relations during periods of major international change (with a specific emphasis on US–China relations) and another focusing on the environmental protection of US military bases, including overseas bases in the Indo-Pacific, as well as installations in the US states and territories. He has conducted extensive research into Diego Garcia, the largest island of the Chagos Archipelago (British Indian Ocean Territory), which is home to one of the most important US military bases in the world. He received his PhD from the University of Texas at Austin and holds additional degrees from SOAS, University of London, and the University of Edinburgh. His work has appeared in

journals such as the *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, *African Affairs*, *Anthropology Today*, *Asian Security*, *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, *Environmental Policy and Law*, *International Journal*, *International Political Sociology*, *International Politics*, *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, *Marine Policy*, *National Interest*, *Political Quarterly*, *PS: Political Science & Politics*, and *Review of International Studies*. He is newsletter co-editor for the International History and Politics section of the American Political Science Association.

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