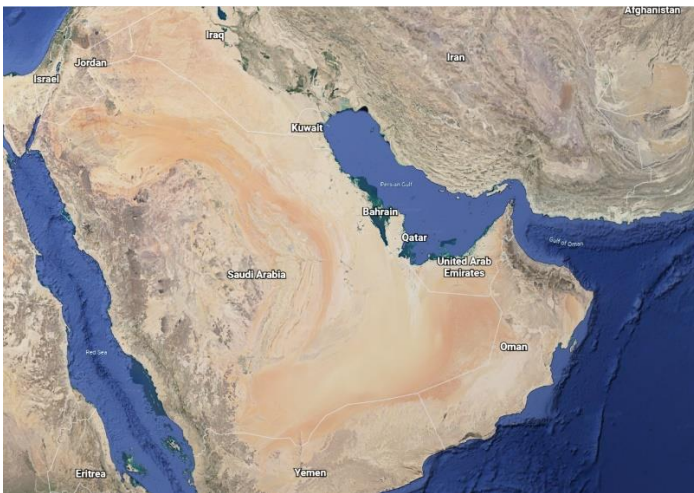


# 1 Introduction: The Persian Gulf and the Indo-Pacific

Dr. Peter Harris, editor



Where does the Indo-Pacific end? For analysts of international relations, the answer to this question is laden with implications. At minimum, the Indo-Pacific is home to billions of people, some of the world economy's most important nodes, and at least three "resident" great powers in China, India, and the United States. At its maximal extent, the megaregion encompasses no less than two-thirds of the world's population, whose leaders look certain to determine the most important contours of international politics

for decades to come.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Indo-Pacific's awesome expansiveness has garnered the attention of national governments across the globe. Indeed, it has become almost *de rigueur* for the leaders of great and middle powers to announce formal strategies for engaging with the world's newest megaregion. Such global attention, however, is only exacerbating a problem that has accompanied the idea of the Indo-Pacific since its inception—namely, a fundamental vagueness over who rightly belongs to the region. Which states and territories should be considered central to the Indo-Pacific? Who ought to be excluded? What is the proper way to go about resolving the region's manifold interstate disputes; who has the authority to make such decisions?

In this *Indo-Pacific Perspectives* roundtable, five expert contributors from across the region analyze an overlooked dimension of this larger puzzle: the place of the Persian Gulf in the emerging Indo-Pacific order. This is an unconventional way to think about the Indo-Pacific as a contested concept, shifting the focus from East Asia and the familiar question of China's belongingness to the Indo-Pacific to the region's westernmost reaches. Do global actors treat the

Persian Gulf as part of the Indo-Pacific? If so, why? If not, why not? What are the practical implications? Who stands to benefit from a framing of the Indo-Pacific that includes the Persian Gulf, and who stands to lose?

The roundtable begins with Angel Damayanti's expert overview of Persian Gulf security from an ASEAN perspective. Is there a potential for the Persian Gulf to develop a set of regional institutions to mirror those in Southeast Asia? What interest might ASEAN states have in exporting their approach to international affairs to the other side of the Indian Ocean? Damayanti points to several areas where the fraught geopolitics of the Persian Gulf region might be tempered if only local actors would emulate their peers in Southeast Asia. In turn, she raises the tantalizing prospect of a pan-Indo-Pacific set of norms and institutions that would truly promote peace, stability, order, and inclusive prosperity.

Shifting to a Gulf perspective, Jean-Loup Samaan provides an analysis of the United Arab Emirates' (UAE) approach to the emerging Indo-Pacific concept. Samaan notes that the UAE has no codified Indo-Pacific strategy yet has clearly begun to upgrade its economic and security ties with Asian

states near and far. As a dynamic regional economy, active participant in regional military affairs, and an aspiring middle power, the UAE's foreign policy is perhaps "one to watch." Will other Gulf states similarly find themselves drawn to Asia, perhaps coming to see an advantage in styling themselves as belonging to the Indo-Pacific? Samaan ends on a pessimistic note, cautioning that the UAE may soon find it difficult to avoid choosing sides in the US-China rivalry—a reality that other small and middle powers in the Indo-Pacific region are similarly struggling to resist.

Mohan Malik squarely addresses the role of China in the Persian Gulf. He provides a masterful overview of Beijing's inroads in the region, as well as a discussion of American apprehension about growing Chinese influence. Not since the Cold War have US officials been accustomed to competing for the favors of the various Gulf states. Yet, as Malik writes, "Washington can no longer insist on exclusive bilateral relationship with its Gulf partners as Beijing comes courting them with bag loads of money, goods, and toys of war." The larger takeaway from Malik's analysis is that the definition of the Indo-Pacific—what it is, who it includes, where it ends—is

not the sole preserve of the United States and its allies. China will have a say on these questions, too.

Drawing on his intimate knowledge of Iran and its complex relations with regional powers, Kouros Ziabari situates the Iran–India relationship in the context of the Indo-Pacific. This case study provides a neat illustration of just how complex the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific will become if the Persian Gulf comes to be cemented as an integral subregion of the larger whole. While the United States and India might agree on major questions such as the need to contain Chinese influence, for example, leaders in Washington and New Delhi are not in lockstep when it comes to Iran’s place in world politics. Viewed in this light, the Persian Gulf might well be the Achilles’ heel of the US–India strategic rapprochement.

Finally, Kenta Aoki discusses the place of Afghanistan in Indo-Pacific geopolitics. Afghanistan has long been considered part of the Persian Gulf region from the US perspective (it was the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan that prompted Pres. Jimmy Carter in 1980 to declare the Persian Gulf as central to US national security concerns). Aoki, thus, makes an important conceptual point when he insists that Afghanistan ought to be

considered part of the Greater Indo-Pacific by virtue of belonging to the Persian Gulf. The implications of this conclusion are legion but uniformly point in the direction of undermining the conventional wisdom that the Indo-Pacific is headed to become an orderly zone of peace under the stewardship of the United States and its allies.

All world regions are political constructs. There is nothing neutral or natural about how they come to be defined. Regional nomenclature is conjured, accepted, and rejected based upon the ideas and interests of states and their leaders.

Whether the Persian Gulf comes to be regarded as integral to the Indo-Pacific remains to be seen; as the contributors to this roundtable have made clear, regional and extraregional powers have not yet made up their minds on this crucial question.

What seems clear is that, in the short term, extending the concept of the Indo-Pacific to extend beyond the Strait of Hormuz would complicate efforts to cast the Indo-Pacific region as rules-based, stable, and orderly. At present, the Persian Gulf is too riven by territorial disputes, interstate rivalries, inchoate institutions, and uncertain alliances to contribute to such an imagination of the Indo-Pacific. Yet, the eventual inclusion of

Persian Gulf states in the Indo-Pacific project might well be inevitable. Not only is there some evidence that Persian Gulf states themselves are concluding that that their fates are inextricably tied to the future of the Indo-Pacific idea, but also extraregional powers such as China, India, and the United States have their own incentives to conjoin the Gulf with the broader megaregion. How these ideas and interests will be mediated is an open question. ■

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