

Game Play in the Indo-Pacific

Many Players, Strategic Interests, and Common Challenges

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Abstract

The twenty-first-century geopolitical reality recognizes that in an interconnected world geo-economic ties and strategic competition have shifted toward a region that connects two of the most important bodies of water bodies. The Indo-Pacific is a mental construct and a melting pot of the interests of several countries where many of the stakeholders are from far beyond the region, thus, complicating internal and external dynamics. Some noted geopolitical experts believe that in large part the Indo-Pacific is a code for geopolitical schemata—America’s pivot to Asia and countering of China, India’s play for magnanimity, Japan’s wishes to regain its past influence, Indonesia’s search for clout, Australia’s alliance-building, and so forth—and that other states must protect their strategic interests through partnerships, recognizing multipolarity as the character of the new regional order. The aim of this article is to highlight the historical context of the term Indo-Pacific and its significance in twenty-first-century geopolitics, the stakeholders and their strategic interests increasing the complexity in the geopolitical environment of the region, and the scope for cooperation and way forward.

The term *Indo-Pacific* has been echoing in the foreign policy of nations across the world, showcasing the importance of the region. In the 1920s, German geopolitical scholar Karl Haushofer, in his work “Indopazifischen Raum,” coined the term *Indo-Pacific*, examining the architecture of political oceanography arguing the case for the Indo-Pacific as a natural realm.¹ Two decades later in India, Indian historian and parliamentarian Kalidas Nag used the term in his 1941 book, *India and the Pacific World*.²

After a lengthy abeyance, the term gained currency again in 2007 when Japanese prime minister Shinzō Abe, while addressing a joint sitting of the Indian Parliament, invoked Mughal ruler Dara Shikoh’s Sufi text “Majma-ul-Bahrain,” which translates as “Mingling of the Two Oceans,” referring to the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. Abe used Dara Shikoh’s title as a perfect metaphor to highlight a broader Asia in which the “Pacific and the Indian Oceans are now bringing about a dynamic coupling as seas of . . . prosperity.”³ The term gradually gained use in US parlance as well, culminating in the 2018 renaming of US Pa-

cific Command to US Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM). However, the catalyst for the adoption of the Indo-Pacific moniker in contemporary usage “was China’s increasing politico-military assertiveness and the ensuing enunciation of China’s ‘String of Pearls’ strategy in 2005 by a U.S. think-tank.”⁴

So, why is the Indo-Pacific becoming the fulcrum? As Alfred Thayer Mahan, a naval strategist and the author of *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History*, argued “Whoever rules the waves rules the world,” and the thicket lies in the geopolitical realities of the twenty-first-century politics that has led to a power play in a region that is geoeconomically becoming the center of gravity with the shift from the West to East. Thus, many observers have referred to our current period as the *Asian Century*—a politically contested and militarily volatile flashpoint for potential conflicts between the major powers vying for influence that heralds a potential reset of the world order.

Though for the past 70-plus years the United States has spearheaded the prevailing world order, in recent years, China has become the largest beneficiary of this order in terms of growth in trade and investment. Until the beginning of the Cold War, the center of global politics and trade remained across the Atlantic. Later, that was replaced by the Asia-Pacific, which largely excluded India due to its policy of nonalignment. Now, by transforming the *Asia-Pacific* into the *Indo-Pacific*, India has been brought into counterbalance growing Chinese influence in the region. Thus, China’s rise is highlighted as one of most imposing factors in this regional construct.

As Michel Foucault stated, “that ‘power is everywhere,’ power is pervasive and it is truer for China’s power for its neighbouring Asian states. It has certainly altered the political landscape producing different trajectories in terms of accommodation, adjustment, balancing behaviours in the region.”⁵ China is seen as a power player in international subtlety and threatens the political order in the region. Beijing has been asserting itself in the Indo-Pacific through its belligerent behavior, with many accusing China of engaging in “wolf-warrior diplomacy” and of colonizing the region through debt-trap lending. All these reasons and more have drawn the world’s attention to this area as an arena of global interest and emphasized the need to protect their own national agendas by making their presence felt in the region.

The Players and Their Strategic Interests

The Indo-Pacific game is replete with multiple players that are at times in competition and at times intertwined at the strategic levels, interacting in such a way where the engagements and strategic appeal of one powerful state affects the interests and influences the actions of the others. Therefore, what may seem like an ob-

scure geographical moniker is in actuality an attempt to redefine Asia as a strategic center. As Michael Raska states, “The Indo-Pacific’s security hinges on the convergence of four major interrelated developments: (1) the adroit management of China’s rise, both internal and external; (2) the challenge in reassessing strategic interests in the US-led web of Asian alliances; (3) the regional disparities in addressing endemic global security issues; and (4) the prevalence of traditional security quandaries in flashpoints such as the Taiwan Strait or the Korean Peninsula,”⁶ South China Sea disputes, Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands disputes, and so forth.

The power narrative of the Indo-Pacific intersects the interests of major powers like China, India, Japan, and the United States and other players, including Australia, South Korea, and the Southeast Asian nations. This region also has external stakeholders like the European nations—Germany, France, Russia, and others—who are making their presence felt by developing robust Indo-Pacific-oriented foreign policies. Thus, it becomes apparent that the Indo-Pacific is driven by multi-polar order or disorder and determined by the agency of multiple players—the ripple effect of which will go far beyond the mental geographic boundaries of the region.

Observers can gauge the United States’ strategic interest in the Indo-Pacific region through the lens of the Trump administration’s *Indo-Pacific Strategy*, which was released on 1 June 2019, and the latest iteration of that strategy from the Biden administration, which was published 22 February 2022. As per excerpts from the report, for the United States, the Indo-Pacific is “from our Pacific coastline to the Indian Ocean,” with focus on Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Oceania—including the Pacific islands. Washington’s broad strategy is to build “a balance of influence” in the region and manage competition with China responsibly. The strategy notes that China “is combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological might” to pursue “a sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific.” China seeks to “become the world’s most influential power.” Although China’s “coercion and aggression spans the globe,” according to the strategy, the effects of Chinese behavior are “most acute in the Indo-Pacific.”⁷

For New Delhi, the Indo-Pacific forms the main artery to India’s growth and development. Nearly 90 percent of India’s trade and energy supply is transitioned through the Indian Ocean, with approximately 50 percent or more of its trade concentrated in the Indo-Pacific. Therefore, freedom of navigation, securing the sea lanes of communication (SLOC), and the peaceful resolution of conflicts are among India’s top concerns. Apart from economic considerations, the rise of China in India’s backyard is another major irritant. New Delhi is also trying to counterbalance China’s influence by strengthening India’s footprint in regions like Southeast Asia, the Southwest Pacific, the Middle East, and Africa. The Indo-Pacific offers New Delhi the opportunity to raise India’s visibility as a net

security provider and as a first responder, thereby further augmenting its global position. India also figures prominently in the Indo-Pacific policies of several nations, thus enjoying a geopolitical vantage position that New Delhi has been using to advance India's own strategic objectives.

Australia geographically can be best described as a central Indo-Pacific country,

bordered to its west by the Indian Ocean and to the east by the Pacific Ocean, and lies in close proximity to members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to its north. The idea of a strong Indo-Pacific has become a point of reference for Australian governments to define the country's foreign and security policy interests. In terms of its trade interests, however, Australia has looked increasingly to markets in Asia and proportionally less to traditional Western allies. As China has risen and grown more assertive, setting up a strategic rivalry with the US and its regional partners, Australia has begun to find it harder to insulate its commercial interests from regional geopolitical tensions.⁸

Japan, a country often credited with jump-starting the Indo-Pacific concept, however, took time in developing its Indo-Pacific approach. As Mercy A. Kuo states, "China's maritime expansion directly threatens Japanese interests in the East China Sea, with repeated intrusions into Japan's territorial waters around the Senkaku Islands, claimed by China by the name Diaoyu Islands." Although, "Japan's regional military role is circumscribed by its 'peace constitution' and domestic political constraints. That said, Tokyo has been highly active on multiple fronts trying to balance China's rise on the one hand and play a greater role in the U.S. alliance on the other."⁹ Tokyo has been enhancing its game in the Indo-Pacific through Japan's extensive network of infrastructure and foreign direct investments across the two oceans and two continents.¹⁰ A pacifist Japan now seems to be moving away from its post-World War II philosophy of peace promotion and minimal muscle flexing toward being combat ready as the Russian invasion of Ukraine, China's posturing toward Taiwan, and other security challenges. This transition has been an eye-opener for many in the region. In December 2022, Japan "unveiled its biggest military build-up since World War Two with a \$320 billion plan that will buy missiles capable of striking China and ready it for sustained conflict. Its sweeping, five-year plan, once unthinkable in pacifist Japan, will make the country the world's third-biggest military spender after the United States and China, based on current budgets."¹¹

As Rajeshwari Pillai Rajagopalan states, an equilibrium in the Indo-Pacific "cannot be managed by Indo-Pacific powers alone. There is a need for a larger coalition that can call out China on its aggressive behavior. Therefore, much of the region is cautiously optimistic about proactive external stakeholders like Europe."¹² Per Josep Borrell, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs

and Security Policy, “the futures of the EU and the Indo-Pacific are inextricably linked given the interdependence of the economies and the common global challenges.”¹³ Therefore, anything that happens in the Indo-Pacific region directly or indirectly affects the interest of European nations.

ASEAN is at the heart of the Indo-Pacific. As Igor Driesmans states, “ASEAN has a special role in supporting stability of the Indo-Pacific, which has, in turn, enabled strong economic growth of what is now widely recognised as an important engine of the global economy. Over the years, the ASEAN-led regional architecture has provided a space for dialogue and trust-building across the Indo-Pacific and among countries that see each other as adversaries.”¹⁴ Premesha Saha claims this role began when the “main initiative for drafting the ASEAN vision of the Indo-Pacific was taken by Indonesia. It proposed a distinct ASEAN Indo-Pacific approach at a foreign ministers’ retreat in January 2018 and has led the discussion since then.”¹⁵

This new vision was embodied in the subsequent *ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific*, an official publication that emphasizes ASEAN Centrality amid the shifting global politics that are brewing in the Indo-Pacific—especially in the face of growing Chinese belligerence. However, ASEAN has been careful not to mention the China challenge directly, so as not to irk its strong trading partner. Excerpts from the *ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific* suggest that the organization’s members aim to further strengthen and optimize ASEAN-led mechanisms. Furthermore, the “ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific is based on the principles of strengthening ASEAN Centrality, openness, transparency, inclusivity, a rules-based framework, good governance, respect for sovereignty, non-intervention, complementarity with existing cooperation frameworks, equality, mutual respect, mutual trust, mutual benefit and respect for international law, such as UN Charter, the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, and other relevant UN treaties and conventions, the ASEAN Charter and various ASEAN treaties and agreements and the EAS Principles for Mutually Beneficial Relations (2011).”¹⁶ Although there are divisions within the ASEAN itself regarding several issues, it is well understood, given ASEAN’s geographical location, the bloc faces tremendous challenges from other actors—especially when its growth can be highjacked by the tussle of the major powers.

Though each nation’s response to geopolitical tensions differs, strategic interests and challenges intertwine at most levels; thus, building on these commonalities and laying out opportunities for collaboration to engage with other like-minded players internal and external to the region would be vital in stabilizing a region fraught with dangers.

A Common Way Forward

The Indo-Pacific security dynamics are interwoven with today's realities regarding global economic interdependence, climate change, terrorism, resilient and diversified value chains, and the COVID-19 pandemic and similar health challenges, rendering it basically a global commons. This presents a paradox that while there are historical rivalries, strategic discomfort and distrust, bilateral and multilateral forums, treaties, and joint military engagements, the security complex in the Indo-Pacific region is also defined by commonalities and nonmilitaristic norms. As Raska writes, these "centripetal and centrifugal forces both amplify and mitigate sources of conflict in the region. Yet, the risks of miscalculation and potential confrontation exists. Economic interdependencies cannot resolve the region's enduring security dilemmas amid contending national interests, strategies, and rising power-projection aspirations and capabilities. Seen from this perspective, increasing global and regional economic interdependencies juxtaposed by the strategic uncertainties, costs, and risks of potential conventional conflicts shape preferences for long-term competitive strategies between major powers in the region."¹⁷

The best way to keep conflicts at a minimum and heighten cooperation is by building deeper standards for the global commons: i.e., freedom of navigation and equal access as a right under international law to the use of common spaces at sea and in the air, unimpeded commerce, and peaceful settlement of disputes in accordance with international law, environmental global standards, protection of intellectual property rights, and adherence to rules covering the digital economy. All these measures would contribute to a deeper integration of the region rather than continuing to respond to tensions by focusing solely on national security considerations.

Also, the players in the region especially the big four and countries like Taiwan, Indonesia, and South Korea must focus on enhancing cooperation to keep the Chinese challenge at bay while working toward improving military cooperation, reducing conflicts, and augmenting economic partnerships. Conflict-oriented actions shut off avenues for regional growth and deepen cleavages between countries; therefore, it is imperative to develop connectivity based on respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, consultation, good governance, transparency, viability, and sustainability.

Conclusion

As Darshana M. Baruah states, throughout world history "the maritime domain has been a crucial space in establishing new and emerging powers shaping regional dynamics and the larger security architecture"¹⁸; the Indo-Pacific is no

different in this sense. The Indo-Pacific—while being a newly conceived theater of opportunity—is home to the world’s largest economies and generates a third of the world’s economic output, more than any other region of the world. The region has emerged as one of the “pivotal theatres of inter-state contestation and competition.”¹⁹ The cleavages in the dynamics between the region’s internal and external powers is going to decide the present and the future of the region.

The Indo-Pacific’s geopolitical stresses of 2022 are likely to spillover and continue to dominate well into 2023, “with the overall environment staying tense and uncertain. New security and economic partnerships are likely to emerge, and new initiatives under the existing alliances and partnerships may be announced. The security partnership between competing parties may get accelerated, with appropriate signaling. The extension of competition to all domains, would exacerbate friction. The implementation of the Indo-Pacific strategies of different players will get tested for delivery and effectiveness,” as Girish Luthra puts it.²⁰ And thus, even a limited conflict could have catastrophic results. Therefore, to keep up with the embedded forces whether economic or strategic, fostering an era of cooperation, forging more meaningful partnerships, and augmenting capabilities in one’s domestic sphere seem to be at the core of the best way forward. 🌐

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Notes

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