

The Indo-Pacific Rivalry

Numerous Participants, Common Challenges, and Strategic Interests

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Abstract

The geopolitical reality of the twenty-first century acknowledges that geo-economic links and strategic competition have shifted towards a region that unites two of the most significant bodies of water bodies in an interconnected world. The Indo-Pacific is a concept and a melting pot of several countries' interests, with many of the stakeholders being from outside the area, which complicates both internal and external dynamics. According to some well-known geopolitical analysts, the Indo-Pacific is largely a code for geopolitical schemata—America's pivot to Asia and countering of China, India's play for magnanimity, Japan's desire to regain its former influence, Indonesia's search for clout, Australia's alliance-building, and so forth—and other states must safeguard their strategic interests through partnerships while acknowledging multipolarity as the hallmark of the new regional order. The purpose of this article is to draw attention to the historical background of the term "Indo-Pacific" and its significance in twenty-first-century geopolitics, the stakeholders and their strategic interests driving up the complexity of the region's geopolitical environment, and the potential for cooperation and moving forward.

Keywords: Indo-Pacific, ASEAN, Strategic Interests

The phrase "Indo-Pacific" has been used frequently in international relations discourse, underscoring the significance of the area. In his article "Indopazifischen Raum," German geopolitical researcher Karl Haushofer, who first used the term Indo-Pacific in the 1920s, examined the political oceanography's organisational structure and made the case for the Indo-Pacific as a natural domain.¹ In his 1941 book, *India and the Pacific World*, Indian historian and legislator Kalidas Nag first used the phrase in India 20 years later.²

After a protracted absence, the phrase was revived in 2007 when Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe, speaking to a joint session of the Indian Parliament, referred to the Sufi text "Majma-ul-Bahrain," which translates as "Mingling of the Two Oceans," to refer to the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. Abe perfectly saw the title of Dara Shikoh as a metaphor for a larger Asia, where the "Pacific and the Indian Oceans are now bringing about a dynamic coupling as seas of... prosperity."³ The phrase gradually started

¹ Hansong Li, "The Indo-Pacific: Intellectual Origins and International Visions in Global Contexts," *Modern Intellectual History* 19, no. 3 (September 2021): 807-33, <https://www.cambridge.org/>.

² T.C.A. Raghavan, "The Changing Seas: Antecedents of the Indo-Pacific," *The Telegraph*, 17 July 2019, <https://www.telegraphindia.com/>.

³ Raghavan, "The Changing Seas."

to appear in US slang as well, and in 2018 US Pacific Command was renamed US Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM). However, “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 served as the spark for the acceptance of the Indo-Pacific appellation in modern usage.

Why then is the Indo-Pacific acting as the pivot? According to naval strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan, who wrote *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History*, “Whoever rules the waves rules the world,” and the geopolitical realities of twenty-first-century politics are the thicket that has resulted in a power struggle in a region that is geoeconomically shifting from the West to the East and becoming the centre of gravity. As a result, many commentators have referred to the current age as the Asian Century, a flashpoint for potential confrontations between the great countries competing for dominance that might signal a potential resetting of the global order.

Although the United States has led the world order for more than 70 years, China has recently emerged as the major beneficiary in terms of development in trade and investment. The hub of world politics and trade persisted across the Atlantic until the start of the Cold War. Later, the Asia-Pacific region took its place, mostly excluding India due to its nonalignment stance. India has been brought in to balance out the increasing power of China in the region by changing the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific. As a result, the ascent of China is emphasised as one of the most significant components in this regional framework.

That “power is everywhere,” as Michel Foucault put it, “is pervasive, and it is truer for China’s power for its neighbouring Asian states.” It has undoubtedly changed the political environment in the area, leading to various accommodation, adjustment, and balancing behaviours.⁵ China is viewed as a major participant on the global stage and a threat to the regional political system. Many claim that Beijing is practising “wolf-warrior diplomacy” and is colonising the Indo-Pacific by participating in debt-trap lending. Beijing has been imposing itself in the region. All of these factors—and more—have highlighted the importance of safeguarding national objectives by making their presence felt in the area and have focused attention on this area as a zone of global relevance.

The Participants and Their Strategic Interests

The Indo-Pacific game features a large number of players who are occasionally in conflict and occasionally interwoven at the strategic level. These players interact in such a way that the engagements and strategic appeal of one powerful state affect the interests and influence the actions of the others. As a result, what would appear to be a mysterious geographic name is actually an effort to recast Asia as a geopolitical centre. According to Michael Raska, “the security of the Indo-Pacific region depends on the convergence of four key interrelated developments: (1) the skillful management of China’s rise, both internally and externally; (2) the difficulty 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 like the Taiwan Strait or the Korean Peninsula.”⁶ South China Sea disputes, Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands disputes, and so forth.

⁴ Mercy A Kuo, "The Origin of 'Indo-Pacific' as Geopolitical Construct," *The Diplomat*, 25 January 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

⁵ Hijam Liza Dallo Rahimo, "China's Pervasive Power: An Overview on Indo-Pacific Power Equation," *Review of Research* 7, no. 12 (2018), <https://www.academia.edu/>.

⁶ Michael Raska, "Strategic Competition and Future Conflicts in the Indo-Pacific Region," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* 2, no. 2 (Summer 2019): 83-97, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/>.

The interests of significant actors like Australia, South Korea, and Southeast Asian countries connect with those of big powers like China, India, Japan, and the United States in the Indo-Pacific power narrative. The European countries, including Germany, France, Russia, and others, are making their influence felt in this region by establishing strong foreign policies that are focused on the Indo-Pacific. Thus, it becomes clear that the Indo-Pacific is shaped by multipolar order or disorder and controlled by the agency of numerous individuals, with consequences that will have an impact much beyond the region's perceived limits.

Through the prism of the Trump administration's 1 June 2019 Indo-Pacific policy and the most recent iteration of that policy from the Biden administration, which was published 22 February 2022, observers can assess the United States' strategic interest in the Indo-Pacific area. According to study excerpts, the Indo-Pacific region for the United States spans "from our Pacific coastline to the Indian Ocean," with a particular emphasis on Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Oceania, which includes the Pacific islands. Building "a balance of influence" in the area and appropriately managing competition with China are two goals of Washington's overarching strategy. According to the policy, China "is combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological might" to pursue "a sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific." China wants to "become the world's most influential power." Strategy claims that despite China's "global coercion and aggression," the Indo-Pacific region is where its consequences are "most acute."⁷

According to New Delhi, India's growth and development are mostly facilitated by the Indo-Pacific region. India's trade and energy supplies pass across the Indian Ocean in a ratio of around 90 percent, with the Indo-Pacific accounting for at least 50 percent of that trade. As a result, India's main priorities include ensuring freedom of navigation, protecting SLOC, and peacefully resolving disputes. A major irritation, aside from economic factors, is the rising of China in India's immediate neighbourhood. India is expanding its presence in places including Southeast Asia, the Southwest Pacific, the Middle East, and Africa in an effort to counteract China's influence. The Indo-Pacific provides New Delhi with the chance to increase India's visibility as a first responder and a provider of internet security, further strengthening its standing on the world stage. India plays a significant role in many countries' Indo-Pacific policies, giving it a geopolitical advantage that New Delhi has been leveraging to further India's own strategic goals.

Geographically, Australia is best categorised as a country in the centre of the Indo-Pacific, bounded to its west by the Indian Ocean and to its east by the Pacific Ocean, and located close to ASEAN countries to its north. For Australian governments, the concept of a robust Indo-Pacific has come to represent the objectives of their nation's foreign and security policies. However, Australia has turned more towards markets in Asia and less towards its old Western allies in terms of its commercial interests. Australia has started to find it increasingly difficult to shield its business interests from regional geopolitical concerns as China has developed and become more assertive, creating a strategic rivalry with the US and its regional partners.⁸

Japan, a nation that is sometimes credited with launching the Indo-Pacific idea, took time to create its Indo-Pacific strategy. According to Mercy A. Kuo, "China's maritime expansion directly threatens Japanese interests in the East China Sea, with repeated intrusions into Japan's territorial waters around the

⁷ Sankalp Gurjar, "Why the Indo-Pacific Region Matters to the US," Deccan Herald, 2 March 2022, <https://www.deccanherald.com/>.

⁸ Matthew Perry, "Australia's Strategic View of the Indo-Pacific" (briefing, European Parliament, 8 February 2022), <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/>.

Senkaku Islands, claimed by China by the name Diaoyu Islands.” However, “Japan’s ‘peace constitution’ and domestic political restraints limit its regional military engagement. However, Tokyo has been very active on many fronts in an effort to counterbalance China’s ascent and play a bigger part in the US alliance.⁹ Tokyo has improved its position in the Indo-Pacific thanks to Japan’s large infrastructure network and foreign direct investments that span two continents and two oceans.¹⁰ As the Russian invasion of Ukraine, China’s posture towards Taiwan, and other security problems loom, pacifist Japan today appears to be shifting away from its post-World War II doctrine of peace promotion and minimum muscle flexing and towards being combat ready. For many people in the area, this transformation has opened their eyes. Japan “unveiled its largest military build-up since World War Two with a \$320 billion plan in December 2022, preparing it for extended conflict by purchasing missiles capable of striking China. Based on existing budgets, the country would become the third-largest military spender in the world after the United States and China thanks to its ambitious five-year plan, which was previously impossible in pacifist Japan.¹¹

An equilibrium in the Indo-Pacific “cannot be managed by Indo-Pacific powers alone,” according to Rajeshwari Pillai Rajagopalan. A bigger alliance is required to criticise China for its aggressive actions. As a result, a large portion of the region has reserved optimism regarding proactive external stakeholders like Europe.¹² According to Josep Borrell, the EU’s High Representative 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 occurs in the Indo-Pacific area has an impact on European countries’ interests, either directly or indirectly.

In the centre of the Indo-Pacific is ASEAN. According to Igor Driesmans, “ASEAN has a distinctive role in fostering Indo-Pacific stability, which has, in turn, permitted significant economic expansion of what is now largely acknowledged as a key engine of the world economy. Over time, the ASEAN-led regional architecture has offered a forum for communication and the development of trust between rival nations in the Indo-Pacific. According to Premesha Saha, this role started when Indonesia “took the main initiative for drafting the ASEAN vision of the Indo-Pacific.”¹⁴ At a gathering of foreign ministers in January 2018, it put up a unique ASEAN IndoPacific strategy and has been driving the conversation ever since.¹⁵

The ensuing ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, an official publication that highlights ASEAN Centrality despite the altering global politics that are brewing in the Indo-Pacific—especially in light of growing Chinese belligerence—embodied this new vision. To avoid upsetting its important economic partner, China, ASEAN has taken care not to address the issue openly. According to excerpts from the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, the group’s members want to enhance and improve ASEAN-led

⁹ Mercy A. Kuo, "Japan's Military Role in the Indo-Pacific," *The Diplomat*, 12 August 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

¹⁰ Utkarsh Verma, "Role of Japan in the Indo-Pacific," *The Kootneeti*, 1 February 2021, <https://thekootneeti.in/>.

¹¹ Tim Kelly and Sakura Murakami, "Pacifist Japan unveils biggest military buildup since World War II," *Reuters*, 17 December 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

¹² Rajeshwari Pillai Rajagopalan, "Why is the Indo-Pacific important for Europe," *The Diplomat*, 25 February 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

¹³ High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, "Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council: The EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific," 16 September 2021, <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/>.

¹⁴ Igor Driesmans, "ASEAN at the Centre of EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy," *ASEAN Post*, 19 April 2021, <https://theaseanpost.com/>.

¹⁵ Premesha Saha, "ASEAN's Indo-Pacific Outlook: An Analysis," *Observer Research Foundation*, 28 June 2018, <https://www.orfonline.org/>.

institutions even more. Furthermore, the “ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific is based on the principles of strengthening ASEAN Centrality, openness, transparency, inclusivity, a rulesbased 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.

Although every country reacts to geopolitical tensions differently, strategic interests and problems are intertwined at most levels; therefore, leveraging these similarities and providing opportunities for cooperation to engage with other likeminded players both inside and outside the region would be crucial in stabilising a region full of dangers.

A Common Approach

A global commons, the Indo-Pacific security dynamics are intertwined with contemporary realities such as climate change, terrorism, resilient and diverse value chains, the COVID-19 pandemic, and related health concerns. This raises the paradoxical point that, despite historical rivalry, strategic unease and mistrust, bilateral and multilateral for a, treaties, and combined military operations, the Indo-Pacific security complex is also characterised by shared values and nonmilitaristic principles. These “centripetal and centrifugal forces both amplify and reduce sources of conflict in the region,” according to Raska. However, there is always a chance of error and possible conflict. Given competing national interests, agendas, and increasing power-projection aspirations and capabilities, economic interdependencies cannot overcome the region’s continuing security issues. According to this viewpoint, choices for long-term competing tactics between regional great powers are shaped by growing global and regional economic interdependencies in contrast to the costs, dangers, and strategic uncertainties associated with future conventional confrontations.¹⁷

Building more stringent standards for the use of the global commons, such as freedom of navigation and equal access as rights under international law to the use of common sea and air spaces, unhindered trade, and peaceful resolution of disputes in accordance with international law, global environmental standards, protection of intellectual property rights, and adherence to regulations governing the digital economy, is the best way to reduce conflicts and increase cooperation. Instead of continuing to respond to tensions by putting only national security concerns first, all of these actions would help the region become more integrated.

The actors In the area, particularly the major four and nations like Taiwan, Indonesia, and South Korea, must concentrate on boosting collaboration to fend off China’s challenge while striving to strengthen military cooperation, lessen tensions, and expand economic alliances. Therefore, it is essential to build connection based on respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, consultation, good governance, transparency, viability, and sustainability. Conflict-oriented measures close off opportunities for regional prosperity and widen divisions between nations.

¹⁶ ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (Jakarta: ASEAN, 2020), <https://asean.org/>.

¹⁷ Raska, "Strategic Competition and Future Conflicts."

Conclusion

In all of human history, “the maritime domain has been a crucial space in establishing new and emerging powers shaping regional dynamics and the larger security architecture”¹⁸ (Darshana M. Baruah), and the Indo-Pacific is no exception. Although it is a relatively recent theatre of opportunity, the Indo-Pacific is home to the world’s largest economies and produces a third of global GDP, more than any other area. The area has become known as one of the “pivotal theatres of inter-state contestation and competition.”¹⁹ The region’s present and future will be determined by the divisions in the dynamics between its internal and external powers.

Geopolitical tensions in the Indo-Pacific in 2022 are projected to spread and remain dominant far into 2023, “with the overall atmosphere being tense and unclear. It’s likely that new economic and security alliances will form, and it’s also possible that new collaborations and alliance-related activities will be launched. With the right signalling, the security partnership between rival parties might accelerate. Friction would increase if competition were to spread to all fields. As stated by Girish Luthra, “the delivery and effectiveness of the Indo-Pacific strategy of diverse players will be evaluated.”²⁰ Therefore, even a small quarrel could have disastrous consequences. As a result, it appears that the only way forward is to develop an era of collaboration, forge deeper relationships, and strengthen capabilities in one's home domain in order to keep up with the underlying forces, whether they be economic or strategic.

¹⁸ Darshana M. Baruah, “India in the Indo-Pacific: New Delhi's Theatre of Opportunity,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 30 June 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/>.

¹⁹ Ambar Kumar Ghosh et al., “Security, Economy and Ecology: Setting Priorities for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific,” Observer Researcher Foundation, 25 February 2022, <https://www.orfonline.org/>.

²⁰ Girish Luthra, “The Indo-Pacific region, maritime focus, and ocean governance,” Observer Researcher Foundation, 28 January 2022, <https://www.orfonline.org/>.