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‘Redefining regions: Mapping the Indo-Pacific’s emergence’

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Redefining regions: Mapping the Indo-Pacific's emergence

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The idea of the “Indo-Pacific” as a way of thinking about what was formerly described as either the Asia-Pacific, East Asia, Southeast Asia, or South Asia tells us more about politics than it does about geography. Regions are arbitrary and discursive constructs at the best of times, but the popularity of some formulations has more to do with the relative standing and “visions” of particular actors than it does with anything geophysical or inherent to the “region” itself. Regional identities depend on the way we think about particular areas of the planet that may contain radically different social, economic, and political formations, to say nothing about the underlying geography itself. “Asia” is the quintessential example of an all-encompassing label that is not terribly helpful when trying to think about what distinguishes it from any other part of the world. Indeed, the idea of “Asia” was a European invention and a convenient shorthand for European imperialists intent on expansion and domination.¹ At the very least, regional definitions—if they catch on—demarcate between insiders and outsiders, as well as potential friend and foe. In short, for all their arbitrary origins, regions can be consequential.²

The possibility that insiders might benefit from regional membership is not the only reason regions remain important parts of a supposedly “global” inter-state system. In reality, of course, some parts of the world are far more global than others; but even in some of the most highly integrated parts of the world, regional identities are—or were—potentially important dimensions of the way politics, economics and even strategic relations are organised across national borders. For all the tribulations that the European Union (EU) is currently experiencing, it remains the most important and highly developed exemplar of just what effective regional coordination can accomplish, and why states remain interested in its potential benefits, concerns about diminished sovereignty notwithstanding.³ In an era when many issues

¹ Kissinger, H. (2014) *World Order*, (New York: Penguin), p 172.

² Beeson, M. (2014) *Regionalism and Globalization in East Asia: Politics, Security and Economic Development*, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave).

³ Manners, I. (2002) ‘Normative power Europe: A contradiction in terms?’, *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 40(2): 235-258; Moravcsik, A. (1998) *The Choice for Europe: Social Purpose and State Power from Messina to Maastricht*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press).

are beyond the capacity of individual states to resolve, effective regional institutions offer a potentially important way of resolving collective action problems.⁴

The EU is also a reminder that regions can emerge and be driven by a desire to generate a sense of strategic solidarity against a perceived external threat. Without what seemed like the very real threat posed by the Soviet Union in the aftermath of World War II it is debateable whether the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) would have been created and endured in quite the way it did, or whether the United States would have been quite as willing to underwrite the Marshall Plan and help rebuild the devastated European continent.⁵ It is unclear whether the Indo-Pacific idea will amount to much at all, but the fact that the US (and some of its key allies) sees it as part of a response to the “rise of China” suggests that it might: the European experience—and to a lesser extent, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)—suggests that successful regional projects can emerge from the most inauspicious and unlikely circumstances.⁶

This paper explores the potential for the “Indo-Pacific” idea to replicate the experience of the EU and ASEAN, by considering its origins and more recent development. We argue that thus far the Indo-Pacific remains very much a work-in-progress and a rather problematic one at that. In part, this reflects a degree of ambivalence on the part of some of its key participants, most notably India and the ASEAN states. In part, we suggest that the Indo-Pacific’s limited progress reflects the difficulty of actually institutionalising the concept into an effective and attractive regional mechanism—not least because there is already a plethora of competing visions and initiatives competing for attention and relevance.⁷ In addition, some of the key advocates of the Indo-Pacific idea, such as former Defence and Foreign Minister Stephen Smith, don’t actually see institutionalisation as the key test of the concept’s efficacy: simply redefining the region and Australia’s place in it is the main goal.⁸

⁴ Patrick, S. (2014) 'The unruly world: The case for good enough global governance', *Foreign Affairs* 93(1): 58-73.

⁵ Katzenstein, P.J. (2005) *A World of Regions: Asia and Europe in the American Imperium*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press).

⁶ Acharya, A. (2003/04) "Will Asia's past be its future?", *International Security* 28(3): 149-164; Milward, A.S. (2003) *The Reconstruction of Western Europe, 1945-51*, (London: Routledge).

⁷ Beeson, M. (2019) 'Asia's competing multilateral initiatives: quality versus quantity', *The Pacific Review* 32(2): 245-255.

⁸ Personal communication with authors.

Encouraging the American policymakers to see the region in the same way is a related goal, but one that has been made more difficult because the US is now a much more erratic, unpredictable and “transactional” international force under Donald Trump than it was in the aftermath of World War II when both allies and foes were clearly differentiated.⁹ This is making life increasingly difficult for even the staunchest of allies. The People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) deep economic integration into the region in which it has been such an historically pivotal part means that potential friends and foes face a much more complex calculus when deciding their allegiances, identities and participation in nascent regional forums.¹⁰ Indeed, it has been persuasively argued that the Trump administration has actually helped the PRC leadership and many analysts in China “have concluded that Trump’s policies are strategically very good for China in the long run.”¹¹ There is consequently much at stake in how the region is defined and who determines its trajectory.

The Origins of the Indo-Pacific

Some words and phrases seem to appear spontaneously, as if from nowhere. “Globalisation” is perhaps the most influential recent example of a concept that didn’t seem to exist before the 1990s and the fall of the Berlin Wall, but is now ubiquitous. Indeed, part of the problem with the idea of globalisation is that it is invoked as a shorthand for a number of processes that are frequently assumed rather than carefully delineated, leading some observers to think that it is too all-encompassing to be useful.¹² Whatever the merits of such claims in the case of globalisation, the “Indo-Pacific” is a rather different kettle of conceptual fish. Not only has it failed to catch on in anything like the way that globalisation has, or even narrower, more specific descriptors such as East Asia or the formerly popular Asia-Pacific,¹³ but it has been consciously promoted in a way none of these other ideas has. In other words, we are still in the midst of a self-conscious effort to try and promote a particular way of thinking about a putative

⁹ Kagan, R. (2018) *The Jungle Grows Back: American and Our Imperiled World*, (New York: Knopf).

¹⁰ Friedberg, A.L. (2018) 'Globalisation and Chinese grand strategy', *Survival* 60(1): 7-40; Zhang, X. and James, K. (2017) 'From Wealth to Power: China’s New Economic Statecraft', *The Washington Quarterly* 40(1): 185-203.

¹¹ Haenle, P. and Bresnick, S. (2019) ‘Trump is Beijing’s best asset’, *Foreign Policy*, October 15.

¹² For one of the best sympathetic discussions, see Held, D., McGrew, A., Goldblatt, D. and Perraton, J. (1999) *Global Transformations: Politics, Economics and Culture*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press).

¹³ Dirlik, A. (1992) 'The Asia-Pacific idea: reality and representation in the invention of regional structure', *Journal of World History* 3(1): 55-79.

region. Unpacking the process tell us much about its prospects and the motivations of some its principal protagonists.

Japan: leading from behind?

Japan has played a surprisingly prominent role in promoting new ways of conceptualising the region of which it has sometimes been a prominent part. The still unresolved legacy of World War II and Japan's abortive "Co-Prosperity Sphere"¹⁴—a form of coercive regionalism that won few admirers—has meant that Japan has found it difficult to play the sort of diplomatic role that its economic importance might lead us to expect.¹⁵ When coupled to its distinctive strategic reliance—even subordination—to the US,¹⁶ this has meant that Japanese regional leadership has generally been absent or conducted with a close ally, such as Australia. Japan's willingness to allow Australia to take the lead on promoting the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum is the most consequential example of Japan "leading from behind."¹⁷ Despite Japan's reputation as a "reactive" state in which the formulation, let alone the development, of independent foreign policy has frequently been seen as inherently problematic, Japan has generated some important ideas and initiatives, even if it has not always followed through on them.

The emergence of the Indo-Pacific idea is a good example of this sort of understated and underappreciated role. One reason for this is that Japan hasn't always used the Indo-Pacific formulation. One of the first iterations of a new way of thinking about the region was enunciated by then Japanese foreign Minister Taro Aso in 2006, when he highlighted "Japan's enthusiasm for building an 'arc of freedom and prosperity' around the outer rim of the Eurasian continent through diplomacy that emphasizes 'universal values' such as 'freedom, democracy, and respect for human rights and the rule of law.'"¹⁸ Many observers have subsequently come

¹⁴ Beeson, M. (2009) 'Geopolitics and the making of regions: The fall and rise of East Asia', *Political Studies* 57: 498–516.

¹⁵ McGregor, R. (2017) *Asia's Reckoning: China, Japan, and the Fate of US Power in the Pacific Century*, (New York: Viking).

¹⁶ Pyle, K.B. (2007) *Japan Rising: The Resurgence of Japanese Power and Purpose.*, (New York: Public Affairs).

¹⁷ Rix, A. (1993) 'Japan and the region: Leading from behind', in, R. Higgott, R. Leaver and J. Ravenhill *Pacific Economic Relations in the 1990s*. (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner): 62-82; Funabashi, Y. (1995) *Asia Pacific Fusion: Japan's Role in APEC*, (Washington: Institute for International Economics).

¹⁸ Aso, T. 2006. Arc of Freedom and Prosperity: Japan's Expanding Diplomatic Horizons. Minister of Foreign Affairs, November 30. Tokyo: Japan Institute of International Affairs Summit.

to see this as a landmark in Japan's growing effort to redefine its foreign policies and even its role in the East Asian region as a reliable, law-abiding democratic state, that is driven by values not just interests.¹⁹ If successful, it will provide a noteworthy contrast to the challenge posed by the authoritarian regime in China. Such ideas have been built upon by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.

When Abe addressed the Indian Parliament in 2007, he spoke of a “confluence of two seas,” in which Japan and India might come together to develop a what he called a “broader Asia” [that] will evolve into an immense network spanning the entirety of the Pacific Ocean, incorporating the US and Australia.”²⁰ This was the Indo-Pacific in all but name and it was noteworthy for identifying the other members of what would become the Quadrilateral Dialogue (Quad), which is arguably the most tangible expression and driver of the Indo-Pacific idea, as we explain in more detail below. It is equally significant, of course, that there was no mention of Japan's great regional rival, the PRC, despite the fact that, like the rest of the region—however it might be defined—China is Japan's major trading partner, too.

Japan's relationship with the PRC is perhaps even more important than its relationship with the US, even if it is impolite to say so. The unambiguous geographic reality is that China isn't going anywhere, while a growing number of people think that the US, especially under the erratic leadership of Donald Trump, just might.²¹ Significantly, greater economic interdependence has not transformed relations between Japan and the PRC for the better, as many liberals assumed. On the contrary, relations are famously frosty and China's territorial claims and increased “assertiveness” in the East and South China Seas have done little to put Japanese minds at rest.²² As a consequence, strategic anxieties remain at the forefront of Japan's foreign policy objectives, even if they have not always been discussed as frankly as they might have been. Japan's diminished economic status relative to China has, however, concentrated the minds of its political and strategic thinkers on the long-term consequences of

¹⁹ Hosoya, Y. (2011) ‘The rise and fall of Japan's grand strategy: The “Arc of Freedom and Prosperity” and the future Asian order. *Asia-Pacific Review*, 18 (1): 13-24

²⁰ Abe, S. 2007. *Confluence of the Two Seas* – Speech by H. E. Mr. Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan at the Parliament of the Republic of India, 22 August. Ministry of Foreign Affairs. <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/speech-2.html>

²¹ White, H. (2017) ‘Without America: Australia in the new Asia’, *Quarterly Essay* 681-81.

²² Bush, R.C. (2013) *The Perils of Proximity: China-Japan Security Relations*, (Washington: Brookings Institution Press).

its giant neighbour's seemingly unstoppable growth trajectory.²³ In such circumstances, reinforcing the alliance with the US made perfect sense, but so, too, did trying to develop a more "diversified" foreign policy and closer ties with the likes of Australia and India, as well as other rising powers such as Vietnam and Indonesia.²⁴

Abe's second incarnation as Japan's Prime Minister has seen him adopt an even more ambitious and forceful approach to foreign and domestic policy. The perennial goal of modifying Article 9 of the American-designed "Peace constitution," which has circumscribed Japan's security policy and ability to act as a "normal" country, has been one of his central goals. Significantly, a deeply institutionalised norm of anti-militarism has made this unachievable, thus far, which may help to explain the unusually high profile attached to foreign policy. Abe's ambitions culminated in the discourse around the "Democratic Security Diamond" on the one hand and the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy," on the other. From 2012 onwards, the Japan Institute of International Affairs (JIIA) began to publish a series of paper intended to explain the rationale for the Indo-Pacific concept.²⁵ In case anyone was in any doubt, Abe helpfully suggested that Japan intended to play a proactive role with the US, India and Australia to uphold freedom of navigation and international rule of law, and would seek to discourage China's efforts to take control of islands claimed by other Asian nations.²⁶ These efforts would eventually culminate in the resurrection of the Quad initiative following Foreign Minister Taro Kono's proposal for a formal dialogue between Japan, Australia, the US and India. In this context, "the resurrection of the Quad in 2017 represents a success for Abe's quadrilateral call in his *security diamond* formulation in 2012 and *Free and Open Indo-Pacific* formulation in 2016."²⁷ Once again, Australia was a willing and enthusiastic partner.

²³ Brewster, D. 2010. The India-Japan Security Relationship: An Enduring Security Partnership? *Asian Security*, 6 (2): 95-120.

²⁴ Wilkins, T. S. 2010. Japan's Alliance Diversification: A Comparative Analysis of the Indian and Australian Strategic Partnerships. *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 11 (1): 115-155.

²⁵ Aizawa, T. 2018. The Philosophy and Practice of the 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy (FOIP)' decoded from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Website. Ocean Policy Research Institute, July 30. Tokyo: Sasakawa Peace Foundation.

²⁶ Nagao, S. 2013. Japan-India Military Partnership: India is the New Hope for Asia. *CLAWS*, Winter, pp. 57-78.

²⁷ Scott, D. (2019). The Geoeconomics and Geopolitics of Japan's 'Indo-Pacific' Strategy. *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, 6(2), p 140.

Australia: first and foremost?

Australia has a mixed record when it come to promoting big ideas. On the one hand, among Australian governments, those of the Australian Labor Party (ALP) have played a surprisingly prominent role in promoting various ideas and institutions designed to address various regional collective action problems. On the other, despite the best of intentions, intellectual firepower and diplomatic effort, the success of these initiatives has generally been rather underwhelming. Even high-profile developments such as APEC and the potentially even more consequential ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) have had a limited impact on regional economic or strategic policy. Regional sensitivities about the possible impact on ASEAN's supposed "centrality" in all such developments and the need to achieve consensus on any proposals have, as we explain more fully later, stymied efforts to build effective and powerful institutions. Undeterred, however, Australian policymakers continue to play the sort of role as an "ideas broker" and/or "policy entrepreneur" that some observers think befits a so-called middle power.²⁸

A number of individuals have played prominent roles in promoting the idea of the Indo-Pacific in Australian policy debates. The ALP's hyper-active former Foreign Minister Gareth Evans did more than most to reorient Australia's relationship with its region, no matter how it has been defined. He was among the first to recognise the importance, and start using the language of the Indo-Pacific.²⁹ It is also no coincidence that a number of other former defence and foreign ministers have come from Western Australia, where the emergence of India may ultimately prove to be as consequential as the rise of China, for a state that is at the very centre of the Indo-Pacific idea. Kim Beazley as minister for defence, deputy prime minister and as a West Australian, has continually advocated for more importance being placed on the Indian Ocean and the western seaboard and was instrumental in Australia's 1987 adoption of the "Two-Ocean Policy."³⁰ Fellow West Australian Stephen Smith remains an influential advocate of closer ties with both India and Southeast Asia and has been an influential champion of the

²⁸ See, Beeson, M. and Higgott, R. (2014) 'The changing architecture of politics in the Asia-Pacific: Australia's middle power moment?', *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 14(2): 215-237.

²⁹ Evans, G. (2010) *Australia's Asian Future*, 16 September. <http://www.gevans.org/speeches/speech423.html>

³⁰ DeSilva-Ranasinghe, S. 2016. The Politics of the Two Ocean Navy: An Interview with the Hon Kim Beazley. *Australian Outlook*, June 16; Beazley, K. (2016) *The Politics of the Two Ocean Navy*, Interview, Australian Institute of International Affairs, June 16, <http://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/beazley-on-the-politics-of-two-ocean-navy/>.

concept,³¹ but some credit Peter Varghese, Australia's former High Commissioner in India, with really getting the idea on the agenda when he became secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in 2012.³²

Although high profile public officials have attracted the most attention, one of the distinctive features of Australia's contribution to policy debates and initiatives has been the role played by academics. Perhaps the most prominent example of this is Ross Garnaut, former advisor to Bob Hawke, author of a highly influential report on the rise of northeast Asia, and more recently a major contributor to international debates on responding to climate change. Garnaut was part of an influential "epistemic community" that provided much of the intellectual impetus and rationale for the establishment of APEC.³³ His influence was amplified by a domestic government looking for new policy ideas, and by a Japanese government keen to ensure they were not locked out of North American markets. A similar confluence of favourable international and domestic forces has allowed individuals, such as Australia's Rory Medcalf, to promote ideas that found a receptive audience.³⁴

For observers such as Medcalf, China is the "quintessential Indo-Pacific power," while the United States remains "indispensable." The principal driver of the Indo-Pacific's increased prominence in this context is economic:

the roots of the Indo-Pacific era lie not in the rarefied realms of strategy, diplomacy or map-making but in something much more basic and material: the growing reliance of China, India, Japan and other economies on trade, investment and energy links with the Middle East, Africa and South Asia.³⁵

Although the economic potential has frequently been emphasised by commentators and an Australian government eager to downplay the possibility that it might be seen as a mechanism

³¹ Smith, Stephen (2008) *Australia and India: The Strategic Outlook*, Speech to the Confederation of Indian Industries, Chennai, 9 September. https://foreignminister.gov.au/speeches/2008/080909_chennai.html

³² Medcalf, R. 2019. Indo-Pacific Visions: Giving Solidarity a Chance. *Asia Policy*, 14 (3): 79-95.

³³ Beeson, M. and Stone, D. (2013) 'The changing fortunes of a policy entrepreneur: The case of Ross Garnaut', *Australian Journal of Political Science* 48(1): 1-14.

³⁴ Scott, D. (2013). Australia's embrace of the "Indo-Pacific": New term, new region, new strategy? *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 13(3), 425-448.

³⁵ Medcalf, R. (2013). 'The Indo-Pacific : What's in a name?' *The American Interest*, 9(2), 1-9.

for “containing China,”³⁶ it is significant that the principal expressions of the Indo-Pacific idea have appeared in policy papers primarily associated with security. An indication of the shifting discourse and thinking of Australian policy officials appeared in 2013,³⁷ but confirmation of the centrality of the Indo-Pacific as a “framing device” for strategic and diplomatic policy was evident in the 2016 Defence White Paper. From this time the Indo-Pacific dominated government rhetoric and policy statements. Significantly, it was distinguished from a “nearer region” of “most immediate importance,” (which included Papua New Guinea, Timor-Leste and Pacific Island Countries and maritime South East Asia), and the wider Indo-Pacific that ran from “the Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean connected by South East Asia, through and within which most of Australia’s trade activity occurs.”³⁸

One other feature of Defence’s evolving perspective was also both familiar and noteworthy in this landmark expression of evolving strategic thinking: “The world will continue to look to the United States for leadership in global security affairs and to lead military coalitions that support international security and the rules-based global order.”³⁹ That a middle power such as Australia might have an interest in the preservation (or development) of a rules-based international order is unsurprising, perhaps, which explains its continuing prominence in foreign policy rhetoric. What is more surprising perhaps, is the continuing primacy attached to the alliance relationship, especially in the Trump era when the United States is widely seen as a much less predictable and reliable ally, as well as one of the greatest threats to the existing international order it did so much to create.⁴⁰

The United States and the Future of the Indo-Pacific

For a comparatively young country, the United States has a long history of engagement with what its leaders have come to describe predominantly as the Asia-Pacific.⁴¹ Indeed, America’s “hegemonic” role in the aftermath of the Second World War was instrumental in shaping the region and effectively stopping the sort of deep cross-border integration and cooperation that

³⁶ DFAT (2012). *Australia in the Asian Century*. White Paper, October. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.

³⁷ Government of Australia (2013) *Strong and Secure – A Strategy for Australia’s National Interest*. (Canberra: Australian Government), pp 72-74.

³⁸ Australian Department of Defence (2016) 2016 White Paper, (Canberra: DoD), p 39.

³⁹ *Ibid*, p 41.

⁴⁰ Beeson, M. and Watson, N. (2019) 'Is international leadership changing hands or disappearing? China and the USA in comparative perspective', *Asian Perspective* 43(2): 389–417.

⁴¹ Cumings, B. (2009) *Dominion from Sea to Sea: Pacific Ascendancy and American Power*, (New Haven: Yale University Press).

characterised Western Europe and which culminated in the creation of the European Union.⁴² The point to emphasise about this well-known story is that American power and preferences have been decisive influences on the creation – or inhibition – of regional agreements and identities. In the Asia-Pacific, the US created a bilateral, “hub and spokes” system of alliance relationships that, Cha argues, meant that it “exercised near-total control over the foreign and domestic affairs of its allies, and it created an asymmetry of power that rendered inconceivable counterbalancing by these smaller countries, on their own or in concert with others.”⁴³

Whatever one may think about the efficacy, impact or even the necessity of American strategic policy over the last half century or so, there is little argument that it has been consequential, especially in the Asian part of the Asia-Pacific. Because American policy was driven overwhelmingly by strategic concerns and the logic of the Cold War,⁴⁴ “Asia” remained deeply divided along ideological lines. Although the PRC may have been a peripheral agrarian economy of no great significance throughout the Cold War, it was always seen as an important and contingent part of a rather loosely-defined “communist threat.” That China and the Soviet Union were often consumed with ideological and more traditional rivalries of their own consequently went unnoticed by US strategic analysts.⁴⁵ The net effect, however, was that until recently, when the PRC joined the generally successful global capitalist order the US did so much to create, East Asia in particular remained implacably divided and the very idea of a “region” worthy of the name remained inconceivable.⁴⁶

The checkered history of the Asia-Pacific generally and APEC in particular proved an instructive reminder of just how difficult it can be to translate rhetoric into reality: not only was there little enthusiasm for APEC’s agenda of economic liberalisation and reform among East Asia’s “developmental states,”⁴⁷ but given the existence of other entities such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) dedicated to precisely the same agenda, it seemed somewhat redundant. APEC’s subsequent limited impact confirms this hypothesis and serves as an

⁴² Beeson, M. (2005) 'Rethinking regionalism: Europe and East Asia in comparative historical perspective', *Journal of European Public Policy* 12(6): 969-985.

⁴³ Cha, V.D. (2016) *Powerplay: The Origins of the American Alliance System*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press), p 4.

⁴⁴ Gaddis, J.L. (1997) *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History*: Oxford University Press).

⁴⁵ Yahuda, M. (1996) *The International Politics of the Asia-Pacific, 1945-1995*, (London: Routledge).

⁴⁶ Beeson, M. (2014) *Regionalism and Globalization in East Asia: Politics, Security and Economic Development*, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave).

⁴⁷ Ravenhill, J. (2001) *APEC and the Construction of Pacific Rim Regionalism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

exemplar of the rather underwhelming impact of multilateral institutions in the region—however it is defined—more generally. Indeed, Michael Green argues that “it is a fallacy to believe that multilateralism or transnational challenges will transform the geopolitics of Asia in the foreseeable future.”⁴⁸

Given that the United States was instrumental in creating the Bretton Woods institutions, which arguably became the most influential array of international organizations ever created and provided a key instrument of American influence and/or hegemony,⁴⁹ this is a surprising claim. And yet the idea that American attitudes toward “Asia” have at times been condescending and at times racist is widely accepted,⁵⁰ as is the claim that multilateralism in Asia “is still at a stage where it is best understood as an extension and intersection of national power and purpose rather than an objective force in itself.”⁵¹ In other words, the limited authority and capacity of institutional initiatives in the Asia-Pacific accounts for their relatively limited impact, and that is precisely what some of their most influential architects intended. The pervasive and constraining influence of the so-called “ASEAN Way” of consensus, voluntarism and face-saving has handicapped all the institutional initiatives that have followed in ASEAN’s wake.⁵²

Under such circumstances, the sometimes dismissive and sceptical attitude of American policymakers and commentators to regional institutions in Asia becomes more understandable, perhaps.⁵³ It is equally noteworthy, however, that despite such misgivings, American interest in the region was rekindled as a direct consequence of the rise of China as a genuine “peer competitor” and regional great power. The most consequential manifestation of this possibility was the Obama administration’s “Pivot” to Asia, which according to one of its principal architects was “intended to remind Beijing of US staying power at a time when some Chinese policymakers were dangerously anticipating a US withdrawal from Asia and ready to discount

⁴⁸ Green, M.J. (2017) *By More Than Providence: Grand Strategy and American Power in the Asia Pacific Since 1783*, (New York: Columbia University Press), p 542.

⁴⁹ Agnew, J. (2005) *Hegemony: The New Shape of Global Power*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press).

⁵⁰ Hemmer, C. and Katzenstein, P.J. (2002) 'Why is there no NATO in Asia? Collective identity, regionalism, and the origins of multilateralism', *International Organization* 56(3): 575-607; Dower, J.W. (1986) *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War*, (New York: Pantheon).

⁵¹ Gill, B. and Green, M.J. (2009) 'Unbundling Asia's new multilateralism', in, M. Green and B. Gill *Asia's New Multilateralism: Cooperation, Competition, and the Search for Community*. (New York: Columbia University Press), p 3.

⁵² Beeson, M. (2019) 'Asia's competing multilateral initiatives: quality versus quantity', *The Pacific Review* 32(2): 245-255.

⁵³ McGregor, R. (2017) *Asia's Reckoning: China, Japan, and the Fate of US Power in the Pacific Century*, (New York: Viking).

American influence in the region.”⁵⁴ The Pivot has subsequently been subjected to a good deal of criticism⁵⁵—as has Obama’s presidency more generally⁵⁶—but compared to what has come afterwards, the Obama administration looks like a model of thoughtful, measured and moderately effective diplomacy. Indeed, Obama restored much of the American “soft power” and influence that had been squandered by George W Bush’s disastrously ill-advised invasion of Iraq.⁵⁷ American policy seems set for another lurch into dangerous strategic territory and this could have major implications for regional security policy in particular.

Present at the destruction?

Given the erratic and entirely unpredictable trajectory of the Trump administration, trying to guess what its long-term approach to the Indo-Pacific—or anything else, for that matter—is a fool’s errand. Indeed, when even the political survival of Donald Trump is far from certain, attempting to draw major “lessons,” much less predictions about US policy toward Asia might seem foolhardy in the extreme. Our intention is rather less ambitious, therefore. Despite the uncertainty that swirls around the notional bedrock of the so-called “rules-based international order,” it is at least possible to suggest why the Indo-Pacific has become such a prominent part of the discourse of American foreign policy.

In retrospect, it is surprising that the Indo-Pacific didn’t become a part of American strategic thinking and discourse earlier than it did. After all, the Hoover Institution’s Michael Auslin was one of the earliest voices arguing the merits of recasting the geography of American security. Even more significantly, perhaps, it is a viewpoint that was entirely in keeping with the dominant view about the regional and global role of the US, at least as far as many influential Americans were concerned: “without the continued involvement of the United States, working in concert with like-minded allies and partners, the Indo-Pacific in the decades ahead may be as unstable as it will be dynamic.”⁵⁸ The conventional wisdom in the US has long been that it is what former Defence Secretary Madeleine Albright famously described as the “indispensable nation”: unless the US underpins global peace and security, no one else will

⁵⁴ Campbell, K.M. (2016) *The Pivot: The Future of American Statecraft in Asia*, (New York: Twelve), 22/23.

⁵⁵ Ross, R.S. (2012) 'The problem with the pivot', *Foreign Affairs* 91(6): 70-82.

⁵⁶ Dueck, C. (2015) *The Obama Doctrine: American Grand Strategy Today*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

⁵⁷ Mann, J. (2004) *Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush's War Cabinet*, (New York: Viking).

⁵⁸ Auslin, M. 2010. *Security in the Indo-Pacific Commons: Toward a Regional Strategy*. (Washington: American Enterprise Institute), p 7.

and inherently unstable regions such as East Asia will descend into chaos.⁵⁹ What encouraged a refocusing of American policy, of course, was the concern that “the current desire on the part of the PLA and Chinese leadership [is] to probe just how far they can push regional states and the United States into acquiescing to China’s presence and activities in Indo-Pacific waters.”⁶⁰

Even more surprisingly, it has been the Trump administration that has embraced the Indo-Pacific idea and made it part of its overall strategic outlook. Much to the delight of policymakers in Australia, when President Trump toured Asia in late 2017 he made frequent use of the term Indo-Pacific, rather than the hitherto customary Asia-Pacific, signalling what looked like a decisive and long-term rebadging of America’s role in the region.⁶¹ Given that the Trump administration has become most noteworthy for abrupt changes of policy direction and personnel, perhaps it is wise not to read too much into this. However, it is significant that the Department of Defense (DoD) in the US now claims that “the Indo-Pacific is the single most consequential region for America’s future.”⁶² More ominously and predictably, perhaps, the new Indo-Pacific strategy is predicated on the idea that China “seeks Indo-Pacific regional hegemony in the near-term and, ultimately global pre-eminence in the long-term.”⁶³ Equally predictably, the DoD views the China challenge through a military lens and argues that “the United States must be prepared by sustaining a credible combat-forward posture.”⁶⁴ Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has no doubts about the significance of the Indo-Pacific generally and the Quad in particular, declaring that the latter “will prove very important in the efforts ahead, ensuring that China retains only its proper place in the world.”⁶⁵

The impact of the Trump administration on regional bilateral relationships and the existing institutional infrastructure in the region is becoming clearer as a consequence of such frank admissions: not only have key allies such as Japan, Australia and South Korea been

⁵⁹ Friedberg, A. (1993/94) 'Ripe for rivalry: Prospects for peace in a multipolar Asia', *International Security* 18(3): 5-33.

⁶⁰ Auslin, *op cit*, p 16.

⁶¹ Jaipragas, B. (2017) 'Why is the US calling Asia-Pacific the Indo-Pacific? Donald Trump to “clarify”', *South China Morning Post*, November 7.

⁶² Department of Defense (2019) *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships and Promoting a Networked Region*, (DoD), June 1, p 1. Significantly, the DoD has rebadged from USPACOM to USINDOPACOM. See Copp, T. (2018) 'INDOPACOM, it is: US Pacific Command gets renamed' *Military Times*, May 30.

⁶³ *Ibid*, p 8.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, p 3.

⁶⁵ Pompeo, M.R. 2019. *Trump Administration Diplomacy: The Untold Story*. Washington: US Department of State. URL: <https://www.state.gov/trump-administration-diplomacy-the-untold-story>

disconcerted and alarmed by Trump’s bizarre, inconstant and impulsive treatment of friends and notional enemies, but his administration’s disdain for the sort of multilateral forums that have become increasingly consequential parts of economic and strategic relationships around the world is disconcerting for even the most enthusiastic of allies. True, some of these institutions are currently experiencing major problems and there is a widespread scepticism about their efficacy in some parts, but the Trump administration has played a major role in undermining the very institutional architecture his predecessors did so much to create.⁶⁶ This is a potentially serious problem in any part of the world, as the increasingly fractious relationship the European Union demonstrates. In Asia, however, it is a potentially fatal obstacle as far as realising the Indo-Pacific as anything other than an ad hoc security relationship between the members of the Quad.

Institutionalising the Indo-Pacific

One of the principal reasons that some regions have what Luk van Langenhove calls “actorness,” or “a geographical area that is not a state but has some statehood properties and can therefore act as if it is a state.”⁶⁷ The EU is the quintessential example of this possibility and arguably still presents something of a benchmark with which to compare other putative regional groupings and identities. Whatever one may think about the EU, there is little doubt that it has exerted a major influence on the states of Western Europe and beyond. Southeast Asia, and especially Northeast Asia have, by contrast, much less powerful (or effective) institutions.⁶⁸ To be fair, it is clear that Southeast Asia in the form of ASEAN has had some impact, if only in encouraging other actors and institutions to acknowledge “ASEAN centrality” in all subsequent regional initiatives in return for Southeast Asian participation. The determination to remain at the centre of any regional development is evident in the “ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific,” a brief, rather equivocal policy document that offers to “guide cooperation in the region.”⁶⁹ Given ASEAN’s limited ability to act collectively in response to economic, strategic and environmental crises, this may be an offer that regional “great powers” will choose to ignore.

⁶⁶ Kagan, R. (2018) *The Jungle Grows Back: American and Our Imperilled World*, (New York: Knopf).

⁶⁷ Van Langenhove, L. (2013) 'What is a region? Towards a statehood theory of regions', *Contemporary Politics* 19(4), p 482.

⁶⁸ Beeson, M. (2019) 'Asia's competing multilateral initiatives: quality versus quantity', *The Pacific Review* 32(2): 245-255.

⁶⁹ Association of Southeast Asian Nations (2019) *ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific*, June 23, <https://asean.org/asean-outlook-indo-pacific/>

The good news, such as it is, may be that ASEAN's increasingly incoherent and ineffective response to the rise of China is encouraging some potentially pivotal regional powers to rethink aspects of their foreign policy and begin adopting the language of the Indo-Pacific. It is striking that Indonesia, first among equals and by far the most consequential-looking future actor in Southeast Asia, has begun to rethink its policy priorities, in part as a consequence of ASEAN's institutional inadequacies and limited impact.⁷⁰ Having said that, having international ambitions and a growing status is one thing, actually doing something with it is quite another. As David Scott, one of the best informed observers of Indo-Pacific politics points out, despite an important but inconclusive domestic debate, "the risk continues that bland Indo-Pacific declarations from Indonesia, with its insistence on 'inclusivity' so as not to upset China, avoid addressing key security issues which continue to revolve around China's militarisation and expansionism in the South China Sea."⁷¹ In other words, Indonesia remains constrained by precisely the same sorts of Chinese geoeconomic influence and its own strategic limitations that have constrained the Southeast Asian nations more generally.

Under such circumstances, the potential for the Indo-Pacific to coalesce and assume an identity and effective presence looks rather remote. Some observers have pointed to the fact that existing institutions, such as the East Asia Summit (EAS) are the Indo-Pacific in all but name.⁷² Perhaps so, but the EAS has not been synonymous with major diplomatic, economic or strategic initiatives, and its name is unlikely to be changed to reflect the enthusiasm and preferences of Japan, Australia, or even the US. Indeed, one of the key problems confronting "the region," however it is defined, is that there is a superabundance of institutional initiatives and visions on offer already, all competing for influence and consequently finding it difficult to cut through or establish themselves as the recognised voice of any version of the region as a whole.⁷³ APEC's difficult history reminds us that it is difficult to create a regional identity simply by creating an institution. Supporters of the Indo-Pacific idea seem to be trying to do the opposite: redefining "the region" and trying to make it a focus of policy action. Much will

⁷⁰ Roberts, C., Habir, A. and Sebastian, L., (eds. 2015) *Indonesia's Ascent: Power, Leadership, and the Regional Order*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave).

⁷¹ Scott, D. (2019) 'Indonesia grapples with the Indo-Pacific: Outreach, strategic discourse, and diplomacy', *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 38(2), 194–217.

⁷² Medcalf, R. (2014) 'In defence of the Indo-Pacific: Australia's new strategic map', *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 68(4): 470–483.

⁷³ Beeson, M. (2017) 'Why has leadership in the Asia-Pacific proved so elusive?', *Chinese Political Science Review* 2(4): 567–581.

depend on how effectively it manages to engage India, the region's most consequential "swing state."

Thus far, efforts to engage India have revolved around existing multilateral institutions, such as the ARF and the EAS, in which India has potential but as yet unrealised potential. More promisingly, perhaps, has been the innovative use of "minilateral" institutions, such as the QUAD, and issue-specific trilateral arrangements, such as the Trilateral Strategic Dialogue (US-Japan-Australia) and other overlapping trilateral groupings also including India (US-Japan-India) (Japan-India-Australia).⁷⁴ India demonstrated a noteworthy ambivalence about regional institutions generally and about the Quad relationship in particular, but there has been a gradual but guarded embrace of the "Indo-Pacific" concept.

India's tentative engagement with the Indo-Pacific has happened in concert with slowly strengthening bilateral relationships with the United States and America's key allies Japan and Australia. Since the visit of Bill Clinton in March 2000, the improvement in Indo-US relations has been built on a commonality of interests and common values.⁷⁵ Indo-US security ties have grown stronger over the past two decades as a consequence of growing cooperation around nuclear energy, security and defence. At the same time, India has cemented other core security relationships: following the 2007 Australia-Japan Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation (JDSC), Japan and India made their own JDSC in October 2008, which was followed by a similar agreement between India and Australia in 2009. More recently in 2016, the United States elevated India to the status of a "major defense partner," whereby India enjoys some of the benefits of being a treaty ally.⁷⁶ And in September 2018 during the first US-Indo "2+2" foreign and defence ministerial meeting, the decade long negotiations of Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) were concluded, which allows India access to advanced communication technology and real-time military information sharing.⁷⁷ Although the US-Indo strategic and military relationship currently has momentum, India is yet to fully embrace a US-led "Indo-Pacific" regional order. Indeed, New Delhi's vision of a

⁷⁴ Lee-Brown, T. (2018) 'Asia's Security Triangles: Maritime minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific'. *East Asia*, 35 (2): 163-176

⁷⁵ Mohan, C. Raja. 2003. *Crossing the Rubicon: The Shaping of India's New Foreign Policy*. New Delhi: Viking Press.

⁷⁶ The Whitehouse (United States). 2016. Joint Statement – United States and India: Enduring Global Partners in the 21st Century. June 7.

<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/06/07/joint-statement-united-states-and-india-enduring-global-partners-21st>

⁷⁷ Panda, A. 2018. What the Recently Concluded US-India COMCASA Means. *The Diplomat*, September 9.

broadly “inclusive” regional order can be seen to be somewhat at odds with Washington’s “Indo-Pacific” narrative, which is more narrowly focused on China.⁷⁸

The Indian government’s acceptance of the “Indo-Pacific” concept has been incremental. Following two decades of India’s lacklustre “Look East” policy, it was replaced with a more ambitious “Act East” by the Modi Government in November 2014, which sought greater strategic engagement with ASEAN and other states in the Asia-Pacific.⁷⁹ In June 2018, Indian prime minister Narendra Modi outlined India’s conceptualization of the “Indo-Pacific” at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore. Modi enunciated India’s view of the Indo-Pacific as extending “from the shores of Africa to that of the Americas,” which is a “free, open, and inclusive” region embodied by principals such as “sovereignty and territorial integrity as well as equality of all nations” living under a “common rules-based order.”⁸⁰ The April 2019 establishment of the Indo-Pacific wing in New Delhi’s Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) “provides a strategic coherence to the Prime Minister’s Indo-Pacific vision, integrating the IORA, the ASEAN region and the Quad to the Indo-Pacific dynamic.”⁸¹

While India has been happy to be associated with the reconvened Quadrilateral Initiative as an informal consultative arrangement since November 2017, it is hesitant of any quadrilateral military coordination and security activities and is content with established bilateral and trilateral security cooperation.⁸² Significantly, New Delhi’s “hedge and engage” approach towards Beijing does not allow for the inclusion of Australia in the US-India-Japan Malabar Exercises.⁸³ And although some view India as the Quad’s “weakest link,”⁸⁴ India shares a contested land border with China to the north, and to the south it has witnessed increased Chinese naval presence in littoral South Asia. As Abhijit Singh points out, “New Delhi neither has the naval operational capability, nor the political capital to resist China’s broader nautical endeavours in maritime Asia...[and] cannot bring itself to form a de facto alliance with Pacific

⁷⁸ Panda, J. (2018) ‘Does India endorse a US-led regional order?’ *East Asia Forum*, September 23.

⁷⁹ Palit, A. (2016) ‘India’s Act East Policy and Implications for Southeast Asia’, *Southeast Asian Affairs*, p 84.

⁸⁰ Modi, N. (2018) *Prime Minister’s Keynote Address at Shangri La Dialogue*. Ministry of External Affairs (India), June 1.

<https://mea.gov.in/Speeches>

[Statements.htm?dtl/29943/Prime_Ministers_Keynote_Address_at_Shangri_La_Dialogue_June_01_2018](https://mea.gov.in/Statements/Statements.htm?dtl/29943/Prime_Ministers_Keynote_Address_at_Shangri_La_Dialogue_June_01_2018)

⁸¹ Pant, H. & P. Saha. (2019) ‘Charting a clear course in the Indo-Pacific’, *Observer Research Foundation*, May 18.

⁸² Panda, A. (2019) ‘The ‘Quad’ isn’t about to take on a naval dimension — but it’s not going anywhere. *The Diplomat*, March 11.

⁸³ Singh, A. (2019) ‘India bides its time in the Indian Ocean’. *East Asia Forum*, February 8.

⁸⁴ Grossman, D. (2018) ‘India is the weakest link in the Quad. *Foreign Policy*, July 23.

democracies to openly challenge China.”⁸⁵ In this regard, at least, India has much in common with many of China’s less powerful neighbours: they may not like the PRC terribly much, but they have little option other than to have good working relations with it. Simply put, China is too economically important and strategically consequential too gratuitously offend.⁸⁶ Any regional initiative that looks as if it is explicitly or implicitly designed to curb Chinese influence and ambition is likely to be treated with great caution outside of the usual suspects.

Concluding remarks

The Indo-Pacific idea has some powerful supporters and persuasive champions. Australia and Japan have, in their different ways, demonstrated that middle powers can play a meaningful role as “ideas brokers” and/or “policy entrepreneurs.” Yet getting a big idea or vision on the international agenda is one thing, getting it accepted as the basis of policy is quite another. The good news as far as Japan and Australia are concerned is that the most powerful country in the world has bought into the idea and is making it key part of its discursive and strategic engagement with the newly re-badged region. The bad news is that even if claims about American decline prove to be overblown, the current leadership of the US is having a destabilising influence on the international system it did so much to create in the period following World War II. Friend and foe alike are consequently uncertain about American intentions and commitments, even to the most trusted and long-standing of allies.

Uncertainty about the reliability of American commitments and policy would be disconcerting at the best of times. These are plainly not the best of times, and this means that any regional initiative is likely to be seen through a primarily strategic lens. In this regard, it is hardly surprising that the PRC leadership regards the Indo-Pacific idea with great suspicion—and why wouldn’t they? After all, most of the activity associated with the Indo-Pacific thus far has a decidedly strategic rationale and the PRC is noteworthy for its absence in the emerging web of alliances and minilateral agreements that are giving a more tangible expression to the Indo-Pacific idea. It is not necessary to subscribe to a view of Sino-American relations that is

⁸⁵ Singh, A. 2017. A ‘rules-based’ maritime order in the Indo-Pacific: Aligning the building blocks. *Regional Outlook Paper*, No. 57. (Brisbane: Griffiths Asia Institute), p 9.

⁸⁶ Miller, T. (2017) *China’s Asian Dream: Empire Building Along the New Silk Road*, (London: Zed Books).

inevitably conflictual⁸⁷ to recognise that such developments and attempts to isolate or even “contain” China will only fuel concerns about an emerging Cold War.⁸⁸

That would be unfortunate, to say the least. In principle, there is much merit, especially from an Australian perspective, in thinking about the region in new ways. Australia does sit between two oceans, and thanks largely to the rise of India, its west coast is becoming increasingly important, and not simply for strategic reasons. For too long Australian policymakers have neglected South Asia and, for that matter, Africa. The Indo-Pacific offers one way of literally rethinking its place in the geographic scheme of things. Or it does if the idea is not captured by the strategic thinkers who tend to dominate policy debates in Canberra and Washington. One way to allay China’s fears might be to include it in any further institutionalisation of the Indo-Pacific idea: more Quintet, less Quad, perhaps. The long-term historical reality would seem to be that containment is not an option and would likely prove counterproductive. The Indo-Pacific idea just might offer a pathway to cooperation rather than competition.

⁸⁷ Allison, G. (2017) *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’ Trap?*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt).

⁸⁸ Ip, G. (2019) ‘Despite trade truce, U.S.-China Cold War edges closer’, *Wall Street Journal*, October 16.