

# POLICY BRIEF

Nov 12, 2020

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## Whose “Indo Pacific”? competing visions of regional order<sup>1</sup>

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### *The Indo Pacific arena*

The introduction of the term “Indo Pacific” is designed to focus attention on a vast geographic space stretching from the eastern coast of Africa and the Gulf to the eastern seaboard of Asia, via its great continental heartland. Its advocates claim it represents nothing less than the conceptualisation of a new “mental map” precipitated by the intensifying trade and energy flows across between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, and the pulsing economies of the Asian continent that they propel forward. In short, the Indo Pacific is now viewed by many as the heart of the global economic and political system. As the discussion below reveals the Indo Pacific mental map is a conscious attempt by certain governments to reframe or “rescale” the region they inhabit, or must interact with. In the case of several key countries featured below, the Indo Pacific has now displaced the earlier “Asia Pacific” regional descriptor. Yet this by no means indicates consensus on its exact definition and interpretation among such states, nor its universal acceptance among others.

Leaving aside the much-touted problems in identifying the precise boundaries and extent of the Indo Pacific as a bona fide cartographic region - hence “mental map” is a preferred descriptor - it has also undoubtedly assumed tangible significance as a contested site of geopolitics and geo-economic/geostrategic competition.<sup>2</sup> Arguably a new “Cold War” is descending upon the region in which incompatible visions of regional order are coming to the fore, especially among the dominant superpowers; the US and China. Testament to such

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1 This Policy Brief is loosely based on a full-length academic journal article originally written jointly with Dr Jiye Kim of University of Sydney/Macquarie University, see: Thomas Wilkins & Jiye Kim (2020) Adoption, accommodation or opposition? – regional powers respond to American-led Indo-Pacific strategy, *The Pacific Review*, DOI: [10.1080/09512748.2020.1825516](https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2020.1825516)

2 See Thomas Wilkins, ‘Australia and the “Indo Pacific” concept – disambiguating the “idea” and the “region” from quadrilateral “strategy”’, *Policy Brief*, Japan Institute of International Affairs, 19 July 2018.

a contest for supremacy in this pivotal arena is found in a plethora of Indo Pacific-related political, economic, and strategic initiatives – foremost among them the Free and Open Indo Pacific (FOIP) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – which form the axes of the competing superpower’s regional grand strategies. These in turn drive controversies over the adoption, avoidance, or opposition to the concept itself.

Given the centrality of the Indo Pacific concept to the contemporary strategic discourse, it is useful to investigate a series of diverging national perspectives from across the region. In this Policy Brief a cross-section of some of the region’s most prominent actors are considered: (i) Japan, (ii) the United States, (iii) India, (iv) China, as well as (v) so-called “middle powers” (Australia, Indonesia and South Korea). Such an exercise in comparative analysis will allow us to ascertain the stances that some of the most important stakeholders have taken toward the Indo Pacific concept itself and provide a better understanding of the motivations behind their associated diplomatic, economic and strategic policy initiatives. As Medcalf argues ‘The use of the term Indo-Pacific is no mere word play. It reflects something real: a changing approach by many nations to security, economics and diplomacy.’<sup>3</sup> As the readers will discover, each of the major powers in the region has a distinct strategic and ideological narrative underpinning their individual conception of the Indo Pacific. How these multifarious perspectives interact, and whether their policies succeed or fail, will determine the future of the regional order. As Munson contends: ‘He who controls the Indo-Pacific controls the future’.<sup>4</sup>

### *i. Japan: Visions of a “Free and Open Indo Pacific” (FOIP)*

Though the origin of the term “Indo Pacific” itself is hotly contested, there is little dispute that Japan was one of the governments that sought to embrace the term as early as the mid-2000s. In his brief first tenure as Prime Minister, Abe Shinzō spoke of a ‘broader Asia’ at the ‘confluence of the two seas of the Indian and Pacific Oceans’ during an address to the Indian Parliament in 2007.<sup>5</sup> Under the tumultuous governments of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), confronted with the “3.11” triple disaster of the Great East Japan Earthquake, Tsunami and Fukushima nuclear accident, no notable contribution was made under the Indo Pacific banner specifically, though incremental moves to improve Japanese security posture did quietly continue. Abe’s return to office in 2012 however galvanised his previously conceived plans for enhanced focus on the Indo Pacific.

Subsequent to the passage of the landmark Peace and Security Legislation in 2015, the showpiece Free and Open Indo Pacific (FOIP) foreign policy strategy was unveiled in 2016 at the sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) in Nairobi. The FOIP was hailed as a major diplomatic initiative on the part of Japan and currently entails:

- ‘(1) the promotion and establishment of fundamental principles such as the rule of law, freedom of navigation and free trade,
- (2) the pursuit of economic prosperity through enhancing connectivity, including through Quality Infrastructure development in accordance with international standards, and (3) initiatives for ensuring peace and stability that

3 Rory Medcalf, *Indo-Pacific Empire: China, America and the Contest for the World’s Pivotal Region* (Manchester University Press, 2020), p. 3.

4 Peter Munson, ‘Back to Our Roots: Marines’ Future in the Indo-Pacific’, *Marine Corps Gazette*, 2011.

5 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, ‘Confluence of the Two Seas’, Speech by Shinzo Abe at the Parliament of the Republic of India, 22 August 2007.

include assistance for capacity building on maritime law enforcement, anti-piracy measures, disaster risk reduction and non-proliferation.”<sup>6</sup>

For Japan the FOIP strategy (later recast as a “vision”) is a means of projecting its ‘proactive contribution to international peace’ onto an Indo Pacific stage. In this way it can play a more prolific regional role itself, promote economic interaction, and leverage new diplomatic alignments to compensate for its deteriorating security situation and relative isolation in North East Asia, as pointed out in its annual *Defense of Japan White Paper*.<sup>7</sup> But one should not view the FOIP (or Japan’s broader (Indo Pacific) strategy) as solely about security, the original FOIP outline, puts strong emphasis on economic opportunities. In sum, Heydarian credits Japan with ‘a pivotal role in the conceptualization, and later, promotion of the Indo-Pacific concept’.<sup>8</sup>

Tokyo has been keen to gain adherents to its FOIP vision. Indeed, since the United States adopted (and adapted) the FOIP as part of its broader “Indo Pacific Strategy”, Japan’s vision has received a major fillip, even if it is now more likely to be perceived as an *American* policy, notwithstanding some differentiations between the two. Additionally, it has sought to build bridges between the FOIP and ASEAN’s “Indo Pacific Outlook”, in recognition of the organization’s regional “centrality”, as well as key individual South Asian states (e.g.

Vietnam, Indonesia).<sup>9</sup> Japan has also been deepening its links with the Pacific Island region through the Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting (PALM), in which many of the aims of FOIP – quality infrastructure, capacity-building, good governance – are enacted.<sup>10</sup> Tokyo is also keen to woo extra-regional powers to its FOIP vision, such as the UK and France, whilst the Japan-EU Strategic Partnership, enunciated in 2018, further coordinates their FOIP approach to the Indo Pacific.<sup>11</sup> Notwithstanding, Tokyo has made great (rhetorical) efforts to persuade other regional actors, China in particular, that the FOIP is not exclusive in nature, and that all participants that abide by its (economic) principles are welcome to join. Occasionally allusions to compatibility with elements of the BRI have been made, though in the present political climate, such linkages appear unlikely to materialise.<sup>12</sup>

#### ***ii. The United States: upholding primacy and a Rules based Order (RBO)***

The US has been viewed by some, such as Japan and India, as a latecomer to the Indo Pacific discourse, but from 2017 to the present it has made up for lost time. Washington now identifies the Indo Pacific as ‘the single most consequential region for America’s future’.<sup>13</sup> During this period, it renamed its Pacific Command “INDOPACOM” in 2018, whilst in 2019 it launched its *Indo Pacific Strategy Report* (IPSR), published by the Department of Defense

6 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, *Diplomatic Bluebook 2019* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2019), p. 27.

7 Ministry of Defense of Japan, *Defense of Japan* (Ministry of Defense of Japan, 2019).

8 Richard Heydarian, *The Indo-Pacific: Trump, China, and the New Struggle for Global Mastery* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), p. 230.

9 Thomas Wilkins, ‘Searching for a middle path: ASEAN and the “Indo Pacific”’, *Policy Brief*, Japan Institute of International Affairs, 11 Feb 2020.

10 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, ‘Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting (PALM)’, 9 April 2018, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/palm/index.html>

11 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, Japan-EU Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA), 4 February 2020, [https://www.mofa.go.jp/erp/ep/page22e\\_000707.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/erp/ep/page22e_000707.html)

12 Andrea Fischetti and Antoine Roth, ‘Japan’s Belt & Road Ambivalence’, *Tokyo Review*, 14 May 2019.

13 Department of Defense, *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region* (Washington DC: Department of Defense, 1 June 2019), p. 1.

(DOD), in which it lays out the contours of a fully-fledged “Indo Pacific Strategy” to replace President Trump’s earlier abandonment of the “Pivot”/ “Rebalance” blueprint. This and the subsequent (much briefer) State Department document – *A Free and Open Indo Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision* – have clearly spelled out the economic, governance and security dimensions of its own vision of the FOIP. The (American) FOIP is based upon the principles of:

- (i) respect for sovereign independence,
- (ii) peaceful resolution of disputes, (iii) free, fair and reciprocal trade based on open investment, transparent agreements, and connectivity, and (iv) adherence to international rules and norms, (including those of freedom of navigation and overflight)<sup>14</sup>

These principles align relatively closely with those of Japan’s FOIP (above), yet the context in which they are enunciated in the DOD document reveals them as just one policy prop of a more robust and comprehensive “Indo Pacific Strategy”. The State Department affirms that “The Indo-Pacific strategy is the U.S. approach to strengthening the international order in line with the President’s vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific region—a vision shared by our allies and partners.”<sup>15</sup> The strategic context for the FOIP then entails the identification of China as “revisionist power” and thus represents a crucial part of a concerted effort to push back against the BRI and other Chinese activities in the region, including spreading authoritarian governance to Hong Kong and militarization of

the South China Sea (SCS).

Though the US approach to Indo Pacific strategy has a strong accent on defense (“peace through strength”), it has become increasingly attentive to the economics-security nexus. Washington ‘recognizes the linkages between economics, governance, and security that are part of the competitive landscape throughout the region, and that economic security is national security’<sup>16</sup> The economic/governance prong of the Indo Pacific strategy encompasses a multitude of initiatives such as the 2018 Better Utilization of Investments Leading to Development (BUILD) Act, USAID, and the 2018 Infrastructure Transaction and Assistance Network (ITAN), alongside multilateral initiatives with selected Quad partners, such as the 2018 Trilateral Agreement on Development Finance Collaboration and the emerging “Blue Dot Network (BDN). These US or US-led economic initiatives are however still a relatively weak counter to the more substantial BRI powerplay, and remain a poor substitute for continued American absence from the CATTTP (Comprehensive Agreement for Trans Pacific Partnership).

The overall aims of the American Indo Pacific strategy (in which the FOIP is housed) are to retain a Rules Based International Order (RBO) still backed by American primacy. But as a consequence of shifting power balances caused by the rise of China, sharing the burden of upholding the extant regional order now requires greater contributions from allies and partners. The IPSR speaks of a commitment to ‘sustain American influence in the region

14 Department of Defense, *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region* (Washington DC: Department of Defense, 1 June 2019), p. 4.

15 Department of State, *A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision* (Washington DC: Department of State, 4 November 2019), p. 30.

16 Department of Defense, *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region* (Washington DC: Department of Defense, 1 June 2019), p. 4. [Italics original]



to ensure favourable balances of power and safeguard the free and open international order'.<sup>17</sup> To this purpose, notwithstanding earlier doubts about President Trump's commitment to allies, Washington is attempting to forge a "networked" security architecture. This entails reinforcing existing bilateral military alliances in the Indo Pacific but knotting them together through minilaterals such as the US-Japan-Australia Trilateral Strategic Dialogue (TSD) and Quad (including India), plus forging new partnerships with like-minded partners across the region who fear the rise of Chinese power. Indeed, America's harnessing of the Indo Pacific concept is designed to achieve this purpose, with the State Department noting that 'The U.S. vision and approach in the Indo-Pacific region aligns closely with Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific concept, India's Act East Policy, Australia's Indo-Pacific concept, the Republic of Korea's New Southern Policy, and Taiwan's New Southbound Policy'.<sup>18</sup> Such partnership-building also extends to less-focal sub-regions such as the Pacific Island Countries, (PICs), and greater rhetorical recognition of "ASEAN centrality".

After many Trump-related distractions, the US has finally harnessed its phenomenal power to shape the Indo Pacific discourse around its own strategic narrative and offer enticements to adherent states as counterpoise to the Chinese vision. This has naturally compelled other major regional states such as India and China, as well as the small and medium powers of the region, to respond to the US vision by supporting or interacting with it, or otherwise developing their own distinct national alternatives. This reminds

us that 'the Indo-Pacific is not solely or even primarily an American invention', in Medcalf's words, as we shall now discover.<sup>19</sup>

### **iii. India: An "inclusive" Indo Pacific?**

The Indian perspective on the Indo Pacific is seemingly more mercurial as befits a country steeped in a national culture of "non-alignment" and "strategic autonomy". Thus, in some respects New Delhi's approach appears to lack clarity, with uncertainty of whether it amounts to a "vision" or "policy", while the word "strategy" continues to be studiously avoided. Though New Delhi expressed its interest in the Indo Pacific concept at an early date, with the term being popularised by Indian Naval Officer Gurpreet Khurana around 2006, it is only as Japan and the US have made the term so central to the discourse that it has more urgently grappled with the strategic implications of this new mental map.<sup>20</sup> Rightly so, as Jain and Horimoto argue that 'The very nature of the Indo-Pacific concept makes India a vital actor for all who support this concept as a strategic framework'.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, due to the totemic status the Indo Pacific has assumed under Japanese and American strategic narratives and resultant policies, New Delhi has been caught between responding to these on one hand, whilst concomitantly trying to define and promote its own distinctive national approach on the other.

In the first instance, New Delhi appears generally supportive of Japanese/American regional strategies and the central FOIP policy. In 2017 Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma

17 Department of Defense, *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region* (Washington DC: Department of Defense, 1 June 2019), p. i.

18 Department of State, *A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision* (Washington DC: Department of State, 4 November 2019), p. 8.

19 Rory Medcalf, 'Indo-Pacific Visions: Giving Solidarity a Chance', *Asia Policy* 14:3, 2019, p. 89.

20 Gurpreet Khurana, 'Security of Sea Lines: Prospects for India-Japan Cooperation', *Strategic Analysis* 31:1, 2007, pp. 139-53.

21 Purnendra Jain and Takenori Horimoto, 'Japan and the Indo-Pacific', In *New Regional Geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific: Drivers, Dynamics and Consequences*, edited by Priya Chacko (Routledge, 2016), p. 38.

Swaraj ‘completely agreed to coordinate with each other [Japan and the US] toward the realization of a free and open Indo-Pacific’.<sup>22</sup> There are many possible avenues for cooperation with FOIP-related (economic) initiatives such as the Blue Dot Network (BDN), and potentially a Quadrilateral Infrastructure Fund to improve connectivity around the region.<sup>23</sup> Thus, New Delhi has registered its enthusiasm for the revitalized Quad alignment with the TSD countries, which is closely tethered (but not interchangeable with) the FOIP. India shares a basic adherence to upholding the Rules Based Order, and like the other Quad nations is deeply concerned with maritime security issues (as enumerated above). Though India has been an enthusiastic participant in the Quad process for these reasons, until recently the other partners have worried about its degree of commitment for the broader allied strategy which it manifests.<sup>24</sup> Such concerns may be attenuated as New Delhi faces increasing security challenges, as the recent Himalayan border clash between Indian and PLA troops at Galwan in June 2020 illustrates.<sup>25</sup>

In the second instance, Prime Minister Narendra Modi took the opportunity at the 2019 Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore to enumerate a distinctly Indian approach to the Indo Pacific as embodying the following seven elements: first; a free, open, inclusive region, second; ASEAN

remains central, third; a common rules-based order must be respected, fourth; adherence to international law, fifth; commitment to globalization, sixth; regional connectivity, and lastly; eschewal of great power rivalries.<sup>26</sup> This overlaps with, and thus ensures its compatibility with the US FOIP ‘principles’ enumerated above, whilst noticeably deviating from them. One of the key variations in New Delhi’s rhetoric is the rebranding of the Japanese/American FOIP with the notion of ‘India’s free, open and *inclusive* Indo-Pacific’ (FOIIP) as a variant of the Japanese/US FOIP.<sup>27</sup> While US-allied policies in the IP have strong overtones of strategic competition with the PRC, New Delhi has been heretofore adamant that ‘the Indo Pacific is for something – not against somebody’.<sup>28</sup> This reflects India’s sustained effort to avoid explicit provocations towards China, though as noted this stance is being reevaluated due to current tensions between the two.

Behind this qualified support for the FOIP/Quad we witness a more distinctly *Indian* approach to the Indo Pacific (a nascent “Indo Pacific strategy”). As Panda notes ‘Under the aegis of its Act East Policy, India has revamped and restructured its Asia ties and Indo-Pacific outreach’.<sup>29</sup> This ‘Act East’ policy was introduced in 2014 as an extension of the ‘Look East’ policy pursued since 1991, and initially designed to boost economic engagement with

22 Kyodo, ‘Japan, U.S., India vow to work together on strategic port development as China flexes clout’, *The Japan Times*, 19 September 2017.

23 <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/assessing-quad-prospects-and-limitations-quadrilateral-cooperation-advancing-australia>

24 Derek Grossman, ‘India Is the Weakest Link in the Quad: The four-nation mechanism was set up to contain Chinese maritime expansionism, but New Delhi is having second thoughts’, *Foreign Policy*, 23 July 2018.

25 Lavina Lee, ‘Assessing the Quad: Prospects And Limitations Of Quadrilateral Cooperation For Advancing Australia’s Interests’, *Lowy Institute Analysis*, 19 May, 220.

26 Narendra Modi, Keynote Address at Shangri La Dialogue, 1 June 2018.

27 Ministry of External Affairs of India, Translation of Prime Minister’s Press Statement during his visit to Vladivostok, 4 September 2019. [Italics added]

28 Ministry of External Affairs of India, External Affairs Minister’s remarks during Press Interaction with Secretary of State of the United States of America, 26 June 2019.

29 Jagannath Panda, ‘India, the Blue Dot Network, and the “Quad Plus” Calculus’, *The Air Force Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, 2020, p. 8.

South East Asia, though it is no longer limited to this sub-region now, (with Japan and South Korea, identified as key foci). According to the Observer Research Foundation ‘India’s ‘Act East’ policy is a diplomatic initiative to promote economic, strategic and cultural relations with the vast Asia-Pacific [sic] region at different levels.’<sup>30</sup> Act East now harnesses pre-existing and new policy initiatives designed to serve India’s specific national economic and security interests, parallel to its cooperation with the US (and Quad countries). Prominent among these are ‘Neighborhood Policy’, launched in 2014 to improve engagement on all levels with South Asian states, beginning with South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) countries. This is combined with attempts at deeper engagement in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) through the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) aimed at ‘common development’ and ‘common security’ in order to attain a ‘secure Indo-Pacific’.<sup>31</sup> Perturbed by Chinese BRI-related inroads into these nearby regions, New Delhi has sought to revitalize its efforts under these programs within the overarching Act East policy.

#### ***iv. China: Active opposition***

Beijing is fundamentally opposed to the Indo Pacific as a concept in principle as Chinese analysts and policy makers make no distinction between its shorthand usage as a (neutral) regional descriptor and the policies associated with it as part of the US-led Indo Pacific

Strategy, such as FOIP and the Quad. They are resentful of the continued ability of the US to set the terms of discourse, thanks to its unparalleled material and soft power influence. They identify such “discourse power” as *guojihuayuquan* (‘international speaking rights’). Nonetheless, the unveiling of a concrete and comprehensive American-led Indo Pacific Strategy in 2019, as detailed above, has sparked vociferous debate in the PRC as to how to respond. As Cai contends ‘US strategic shifts for the Indo-Pacific region are presenting significant challenges for China’.<sup>32</sup>

The Chinese are (unsurprisingly) unenamored by the Indo Pacific concept for a number of interrelated reasons. Firstly, some (Western) analysts make the claim that the term “Indo Pacific” represents nothing more than a geographical descriptor for capturing the centrality of this new “region” due to the huge economic concentration and maritime trade nexus it represents. But China is not attracted to this new “mental map” for recasting the region since it is viewed as an unabashed attempt by interested parties to dilute Chinese influence, by scaling up from the *Asia Pacific*, or *East Asian*, regions, where China holds greater, if not dominant, influence. Beijing has always been on record as preferring more exclusive (“closed”), rather than inclusive (“open”) interpretations of “regionalism”. Its predilection for regional multilateral security architecture that excludes countries such as the US, Australia (and India) – such as backing the ASEAN+3 (PRC, Japan, ROK) as opposed to say, the East Asian Summit (EAS), that includes the former - is echoed by Xi

30 K. V. Kesavan, ‘India’s ‘Act East’ policy and regional cooperation’, Observer Research Foundation, 14 February 2020.

31 Ministry of External Affairs of India, Transcript of Media Briefing by Foreign Secretary during State visit of Prime Minister to Maldives, 9 June 2019.

32 Penghong Cai, ‘Meijun Tuijin “Yin Tai” Haishang Anquan Zhanlue Xin Dongxian: Yingxiang Yu Tiaozhan’ (New Trends in the U.S. Military’s Advancing ‘Indo-Pacific’ Maritime Security Strategy: Impact and Challenges), *Guoji Zhanwang* 12:4, 2020, pp. 24-41.

Jinping's statement that 'Asia [is] for Asians'.<sup>33</sup>

Second, China recognises that it is the explicit target of the US Indo Pacific Strategy (being characterized as a "revisionist power") and essentially opposes the headlining FOIP policy and the Quad. Though Beijing has made some lukewarm rhetorical gestures of support for specific elements of the FOIP, such as greater regional investment and economic connectivity by the US and its allies, it is far from accepting the 'principles' it embodies (such as avoiding "debt trap diplomacy" etc.), many of which appear directed against China. It rejects the FOIP as the linchpin of a Rules Based Order, shouting it down with the common cry "whose rules?". The Quad alignment particularly affronts Beijing and is consistently denounced as anti-China "containment" or an "Asian NATO". Liu of the National Defense University (inaccurately) claims that the 'American has entered into an alliance with Australia, India, and Japan to curb China'.<sup>34</sup> This perception is further heightened by India's recent decision to admit Australia to its MALABAR naval exercises.<sup>35</sup> Chinese analysts, however, remain confident that divergent national interests between the Quad powers will prevent its formalization as bona fide military alliance to threaten the PRC.<sup>36</sup>

Lastly, as a major power in its own right, China has already unveiled its own vision of regional order, despite eschewing the Indo Pacific label for it. Grounded in notions of a "Chinese century" and "China Dream" Beijing claims to be working toward a "Harmonious

world" and a "community of common destiny" (though such terms are rarely given concrete substance). Instead we must look at the major policy initiatives that emblemize the kind of regional order China desires to achieve, under its own "Silk roads" mental map. These include a number of related institutions such as Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and Asian Infrastructure investment Bank (AIIB), for example, but the most prominent and ambitious is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI (formerly One Belt, One Road). Though initially more concentrated toward Eurasia (the overland "silk road"), as Chinese maritime ambitions have grown it now seemingly fits the more expansive Indo Pacific descriptor, through its emphasis on a "maritime Silk road". Efforts to use economic leverage in the Indian Ocean and acquire a "string of pearls" for port/ naval access supplement headlining initiatives such as the BRI. Despite eschewing the Indo Pacific label, according to Chacko, the BRI 'effectively constitutes an alternative Indo-Pacific territorialisation project'.<sup>37</sup> Heydarian goes further, arguing that 'Though packaged as ostensibly a trillion-dollar connectivity initiative, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is, above all, about laying the foundation of a "Chinese world order"'.<sup>38</sup> Together we might dub this alternative vision of Chinese regional order as the "Indo Pacific with Chinese characteristics".

China has not hesitated to employ a mixture of economic and political "carrots and sticks" to attract or inveigle smaller regional states to adhere to its vision, which is advanced as a

33 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'New Asian security concept for new progress in security cooperation', remarks at the Fourth Summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia by Xi Jinping.

34 Mingfu Liu, *The China dream: Great power thinking & strategic posture in the post-American era* (CN Times Books, 2015). [No page. Kindle Version]

35 Stephen Dziedzic and James Oaten, 'Australia likely to join Malabar naval exercises with India, US, Japan as part of China "containment" strategy', ABC News, 15 July 2020.

36 Minghao Zhao, 'No need to overreact as Quad moves gear', *Global Times*, 29 September 2019.

37 Priya Chacko, 'Introduction: the rise of the Indo-Pacific', In Priya Chacko (ed.), *New Regional Geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific: Drivers, Dynamics and Consequences* (Routledge, 2016), p. 6.

38 Richard Javad Heydarian, *The Indo-Pacific: Trump, China, and the New Struggle for Global Mastery* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), p. 2.



national counterpoise to the US-led Indo Pacific strategy. Yet, to promote its own vision Beijing relies upon a loose network of strategic partners and only two allies (North Korea and Pakistan), which are no match for the US alliance network. This has led analysts to speak of “BRI versus FOIP” as the two leading powers compete for the allegiance of regional states for their preference of regional integration (e.g. ASEAN countries and Indian Ocean littoral states). Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng warned against any ‘attempts to use the Indo-Pacific strategy as a tool to counter the BRI’.<sup>39</sup> Notwithstanding, an iterative competitive process (or action-reaction cycle) has now eventuated, whereby the FOIP has emerged as an American-led counter to BRI, and Beijing has sought to respond to this through making revisions to its own policies to avoid earlier charges of predatory economics, non-transparent, non-economically-viable practices.

***v. Other regional (“middle”) powers:  
Australia, Indonesia and South Korea***

The discussion above has revolved around the region’s most influential major powers, but one should not neglect the presence and policy preferences of a variety of smaller and medium powers, especially the so-called “middle powers”, that have agency to respond to the diverse visions of regional order (and policies) presented above. To take but an (instructive) sampling of these middle powers, we can observe a range of responses.

First, *Australia*, has played an outsized role in developing the Indo Pacific as a concept, as the work of Medcalf, Brewster, and others testifies.<sup>40</sup> The government adopted it in its Defence White paper as early as 2013, and now it acts as an organising frame for regional policy. Canberra is supportive of the Japanese/American FOIP, a member of the Quad, and has emphasised its Strategic Partnerships with India and Japan, whilst remaining a staunch US ally. It has also boosted its defence spending and plans a range of new improved military capabilities.<sup>41</sup> It has not been enticed by the BRI project (excepting the State Government of Victoria), though has signed up for the AIIB. Given its investment in conceptualising the Indo Pacific and the attendant recalibration of its foreign and strategic policies in this direction, Australia is a crucial contributor to regional security and stability. Beijing’s heavy-handed diplomacy toward Australia in response to the COVID pandemic has also reinforced its commitment in the US-led RBO.<sup>42</sup>

Second, *Indonesia*, as the strongest of the South East Asian countries, has actively engaged with the Indo Pacific concept, both through the “ASEAN Outlook on the Indo Pacific”, and independently. Sukma affirms that ‘The reconceptualization of the regional order — the Indo-Pacific — is a strategic necessity for Indonesia, as well as ASEAN’.<sup>43</sup> As such, Indonesian diplomats have appeared at the forefront of the strategic discourse on the Indo Pacific concept. Jakarta has sought to ensure ASEAN ‘centrality’ (with some success) and

39 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, Transcript of Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng’s Exclusive Interview with the Financial Times, 26 September 2018.

40 Rory Medcalf, *Indo-Pacific Empire: China, America and the Contest for the World’s Pivotal Region* (Manchester University Press, 2020), p. 3; David Brewster, ‘The idea of the Indo-Pacific: what it means for Australia’, *Journal of Indian Ocean Studies* 23(1), 2015 pp. 12-22.

41 ‘Australia to spend \$270b building larger military to prepare for ‘poorer, more dangerous’ world and rise of China’, *ABC News*, 30 June, 2020.

42 Thomas Wilkins, ‘Australia-China clashes in the COVID-19 era: Adjusting to a “new normal” in bilateral relations?’ *Policy Brief*, Japan Institute of International Affairs, 19 June 2020.

43 Rizal Sukma, ‘Indonesia, ASEAN and the Indo-Pacific’, *The Jakarta Post*, 30 August 2019.

position the organization as a stabilizing or reconciling force between the two increasingly hostile American and Chinese visions of regional order, though this task may become harder in future. Indonesia, along with its neighbors, has been reluctant to endorse the FOIP, and experienced limited engagement with BRI, due circumspection in “choosing sides” among the superpower rivals, but this position may become harder to sustain going forward. Moreover, it has also sought to leverage its own interests through a nascent Indo Pacific strategy of its own. Its Global Maritime Fulcrum (GMF) focuses on seven pillars: maritime and human resources; maritime defense, security, law enforcement, and safety at sea; maritime governance; maritime economy and infrastructure; maritime spatial management and environmental protection; maritime culture; and maritime diplomacy.<sup>44</sup> However, Indonesian analysts have expressed doubt at whether the current government remains committed to this ambitious regional agenda due to domestic distractions.<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless, given its interest in the concept, its undoubtedly pivotal “Indo Pacific” geographic location and middle power credentials, Indonesia will remain an important strategic actor and key partner for the Quad countries.

Third, *South Korea* has seemingly played a negligible role in the discourse surrounding the Indo Pacific concept. Even though it is a US treaty ally, it has been less than forthcoming in its support for the FOIP, and given only the vaguest endorsement of the US-led Indo Pacific Strategy, after much equivocation. It is not a member of the Quad. Possibly Seoul’s reluctance stems from two factors. First, like ASEAN states, South Korea is alarmed at rising bipolar tensions in the region, and ever conscious of its strategically vulnerable position

and economic dependence on China, has sought to avoid joining Washington’s flagship Indo Pacific polices, which it perceives as unduly antagonistic towards the PRC. Second, the FOIP was originally a Japanese creation, and Japan is a member of the Quad. Due to historical animosity toward Tokyo, Seoul may be reluctant to join either. Its preference is for its own New Southern Policy (NSP), that seeks greater engagement with South East Asia, than the grand Indo Pacific narrative. Though, it should be noted, much of the NSP conforms in principle with the objectives of the FOIP. South Korea will remain an important player in East Asia, but a less prominent actor in the American-led Indo Pacific vision.

Though they lack the “discourse power” to impose strategic narratives of their own devising onto the region (witness former Australian PM Kevin Rudd’s failed “Asia Pacific Community” (APC) initiative), such middle power countries remain important stakeholders in the regional order, especially if they form a united coalition, and their allegiance/participation in the competing visions outlined above is eagerly sought by the major power proponents.

### **Conclusions**

The above analysis has revealed a multiplicity of approaches to the Indo Pacific concept, and a range of flagship policies directed at promulgating distinct national visions of regional order. While various countries embraced the Indo Pacific as a concept at different times, latecomers such as the United States have made their contribution to the discourse widely felt, through the policies enacted under its umbrella. Roland argues that ‘whoever controls the narrative and formulates the norms and concepts, as well as the theoretical

44 Tiola, ‘Jokowi’s Global Maritime Fulcrum: 5 More Years?’, *The Diplomat*, 11 June 2019.

45 Evan Laksmana, ‘Indonesia as “Global Maritime Fulcrum”: A Post-Mortem Analysis’, *Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative*, 8 November 2019.

underpinnings of thought, can define the contours of a new order'.<sup>46</sup> Continuing disputes over its actual definitions and meanings have not inhibited its widespread use or prevented government policies attached to the concept.

Japan and the US have been the most prominent advocates of the concept to frame their strategic policies including the FOIP and the Quad, (joined by fellow US ally, Australia, and Strategic Partner, India). Alongside a plethora of other Indo Pacific-focused policy initiatives, the FOIP and Quad seek to mobilise the American alliance/partnership network, reinforcing and expanding it to buttress the Rules Based Order, anchored in American primacy. India, as a Strategic Partner of all these countries and Quad member has been broadly supportive of this approach. This has not stopped it from jealously guarding its strategic autonomy, and channelling or subsuming such cooperation to serve its own national objectives as they manifest under its Act East policy. While it has balanced cooperation with autonomy and sought to straddle the US-China bipolar rivalry, being both a member of the Quad and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (led by Beijing), heightened frictions with the PRC in border areas and economic resistance to the BRI are apparently tilting it closer to the US side.

For its part, China dismisses the concept of Indo Pacific rhetorically, which in Chinese eyes is simply 'manufactured super-region designed to hedge against a perceived Sino-centric regional order', according to Pan.<sup>47</sup> But given the prominence it is now acquired in the strategic discourse and as a centrepiece of Japanese, American, Indian policies, it has been compelled to respond accordingly. Whilst denigrating the term itself, which it considered tainted by US policies against China, such as FOIP and Quad, it nonetheless competes in the Indo Pacific

space to counter American objectives and advance its own national vision of regional order. Its Sinic conception of a "maritime silk road" encapsulated in the BRI provides substance to its aims. The "BRI versus FOIP" binary has further drawn the battlelines in this contest for shaping the regional order.

Lastly, one should not rule out middle powers, individually or in concert, or multilateral actors such as ASEAN, from the equation. Their degree of adherence or opposition to the varied opposing US and Chinese visions of regional order may well influence the struggle for supremacy, a fact well understood by Washington and Beijing.

46 Nadège Rolland, 'China's Vision for a New World Order'. *NBR Special Report*, 83, 2020, p. 6

47 Chengxin Pan, 'The "Indo-Pacific" and geopolitical anxieties about China's rise in the Asian regional order', *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 68:4, 2014, pp. 453-469.