

POLICY BRIEF

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Australia and the “Indo Pacific” concept – disambiguating the “idea” and the “region” from quadrilateral “strategy”

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Since its earlier inception about a decade ago, the term “Indo Pacific” has now gained significant traction among the policy community in Australia, Japan, the United States, and India. It was in many ways a dominant motif at the most recent 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue meeting of regional government and military leaders. Certainly, the concept has attracted much greater attention among the group of US allies/strategic partners mentioned above, but Indonesia and other countries in South East Asia have also expressed more cautious interest in the concept. One country that is clearly not so enamored with the Indo Pacific concept however is China. In March of 2018, Foreign Minister Wang Yi dismissed it as an “attention-grabbing idea” that will “dissipate like ocean foam”. By cutting through the fuzzy ideological notions of a coming “Indo Pacific Century” Beijing surmises that the this (re)discovery of the “Indo Pacific” as a regional construct – specifically by the “quad” countries noted above – portends the effective opening of a new arena of geopolitical rivalry aimed at countering or “containing” its own expanding ambitions.

The increased prominence of the term is naturally reflected in the accompanying discourse among strategic analysts and academicians. However, despite this, uncertainty over its precise meaning and implications remain widespread among the strategic community. It is therefore a useful exercise to subject the holistic concept to deeper intellectual inquiry to deconstruct some of its *ideational* (that is: the realm of ideas and definitions) and *material* (concrete policies and actions) components. Recognizing this division is especially important as in much of the surrounding discourse these aspects have been frequently conflated, consequently occluding our proper understanding and application of the term.

In recognition of this contestation between the ideational and

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material dimensions of the concept, this paper is divided into two parts. In the first (ideational) part it considers the origins of the Indo Pacific as an “idea” (typically dubbed an “Indo Pacific Century”), and whether it can be conceived of as a coherent “region”. The second (material) part goes on to see how, partly predicated upon these ideational bases, the government of Australia, with its allies and partners, has sought to formulate and implement a concrete policy or “strategy”. As the discussion shifts from the ideational to the material, it will become apparent that the three aspects – “idea”, “region”, “strategy” – are interfused and in some ways co-dependent (thus making the confusion and conflation indicated above quite understandable). Moreover, it must be remembered that the concept as a whole is still a “work in progress” and this short paper can only offer preliminary reflections aimed at furthering our understanding as it continues to evolve, and a dedicated literature begins to accumulate. While this paper approaches the concept nominally from an Australian perspective, much of the discussion reflects the collaborative nature of the enterprise with Japan, the US, and India, whilst I offer Chinese counter-points at appropriate junctures.

The Ideational side: the “Indo Pacific” as an “Idea” and a “Region”

Grand strategic concepts often have their roots in the *ideational* – that is, the realm of “ideas” – and this one appears no exception. Such a “vision-thing” is explained by a need to attract attention and inspire actors to rally behind an idea and translate it into a policy that will require scarce resources to support it. The notion of an “Indo-Pacific Century” as a precursor, and accompaniment, to state policy draws upon a vision that entails a new regional focus on India and the Indian Ocean as a potential source of increased connectivity and resultant future prosperity. Indeed, the 2017 Australia Foreign Policy White Paper contains a chapter entitled “The Indo-Pacific will create

opportunity”. In this sense, the current talk of an “Indo Pacific Century” is often used to introduce or frame government policies in a way analogous to Former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s earlier declamation of an “Asia Pacific Century” in 2009, to buttress his subsequent “Asia Pacific community” initiative.

Well-placed advocates in Canberra have long sought a greater policy focus upon India and the Indian Ocean, and their success on this score accounts for its new prominence in re-conceptualizing Australian regional diplomacy (thus dovetailing with notions of an “Indian Century” in New Delhi). This was first reflected by the wholesale replacement of the term “Asia Pacific” with “Indo Pacific” in the 2012 Australia in the Asian Century white paper, and more recently, both the 2016 Defence White Paper and 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper appear to have made this switch permanent. Once this shift in rhetoric has taken hold it unsurprisingly begins to replicate itself in the accompanying strategic and academic discourse, thus further reinforcing this “socialization” process. For example, the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) now has an “Indo Pacific” blog section. The 2018 rebranding of America’s Pacific Command (PACOM) as the “Indo-Pacific Command” (INDOPACOM) represents the apogee of this dynamic. Though analysts and government interlocutors have sought to stress that the “Indo-Pacific” is not just a new word for the “Asia Pacific”, one could be forgiven for gaining such an impression, as various actors have scrambled to exchange this “old” term for the shiny “new” one to describe the “region”.

For Canberra, the identification of the “Indo Pacific” as a new “region” is motivated by ideas of national self-interest. Indo Pacific boosters in Australia have made a strong case that the terminology used to describe its geostrategic setting needs updating to recognize new realities – the vital commercial and strategic lines of communication that increasingly knit

the Indian and Western Pacific Oceans together – with Australia and South East Asia at their nexus. Since this fortuitously places Australia at the “heart” of this new region rather than on its “periphery” as it is/was with the Asia Pacific, it is unsurprising that Canberra has emerged as an enthusiastic proponent of the new nomenclature.

But questions remain as to the definitional and strategic coherence of the Indo Pacific as a substantive (geographic) “region”. Despite Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s claim that it is a “natural region”, it is difficult to argue a priori that a well-defined and meaningful “Indo-Pacific” region actually exists. Instead, the appellation appears to seek to graft the more-established *Indian Ocean region* onto existing notions of the *Asia-Pacific region* by way of traversing and including the East Asian heartland. There is no firm consensus on which states are definitively part of the descriptor, with its African and Arabian boundaries typically left vague (though some have even suggested the Middle East be incorporated!). Moreover, various Australian White papers have applied different and conflicting geographical markers to the region, further blurring its demarcation. Therefore, its membership and boundaries are therefore highly contested and subject to multiple interpretations. Notwithstanding, the result might more properly be called “Indo-Asia-Pacific” as some interlocutors prefer, but “Indo-Pacific” will serve as shorthand, even as it accents the dual Oceanic nature of the appellation, clearly reflecting the maritime emphasis of its key proponents (see below).

However, in an attempt to create such a “super region” several problems of conceptual integrity present themselves. First, the existence of this region is predicated upon the claimed acceleration of regional trade and other forms of connectivity – know as “regionalization”. But the sheer scale and diversity represented by knitting together the states of the Indian and Western Pacific Oceans risks both conceptual

and geographical incoherence. It is true that large volumes of seaborne trade transit across the Indian Ocean into the Western Pacific, in particular energy supplies, and one of the key foci of the Indo Pacific concept is the maintenance of these crucial Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs). However, actual economic ties between states in the Indian Ocean and Asia-Pacific are weak, and most Indian Ocean littoral states actually are poorly configured to engage in increased economic integration. This fact is important, since the Indo Pacific strategy described below, under the aura of a prosperous Indo Pacific Century to come, places significant emphasis on the economic potentialities to be found here. Second, again partly due to its scale, though cast as a “single strategic system”, this super region does not represent a logical “regional security complex” – in academic parlance; one in which the security of its components states is automatically affected by that of its neighbors to a significant and often direct degree (unlike say North East Asia or South East Asia, as sub-regions of the Asia Pacific).

Lastly, a sense of “regionalism” to support the new Indo Pacific region is lacking and unlikely to emerge. Though various sub-regional and minilateral organizations exist such as The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), the level of regional institutionalization is far weaker than in the Asia Pacific. Consequently, much of the discourse has been limited to focusing upon the Indo-American-Japanese-Australian “Quad” mechanism (discussed in detail below). Not only does the Indo Pacific lack the necessary institutional architecture to knit it together, but the creation of such a pan regional organization, when one considers the difficulties already found in the Asia Pacific (and Rudd’s failed Asia Pacific community), renders such an enterprise infeasible. Moreover, no sense of regional consciousness inherently exists to give rise to

intuitionism or any form of “we-feeling” – do New Zealanders, Bangladeshis, Mongolians and Tanzanians really believe they inhabit the same region? As a result, perhaps, it might be better thought of as “cross-regional” or “inter-regional” concept at best. While these reservations certainly do not completely invalidate the regional concept in some form, they do imply limitations in its practical realization that have sometimes been overlooked in the ideological fervor it has attracted. Nevertheless, though a clearly demarcated regional descriptor is lacking, this does not necessarily preclude the projection of a policy agenda onto this contested area, as the following section now discusses.

The Material side: A “strategy” (“Free and Open Indo-Pacific”)

Following the appearance of an ideological vision – “Indo Pacific Century” – and the identification of a “regional” referent as a stage upon which this vision will unfold – interested governments will then translate their objectives into a dedicated strategy aimed at realizing the opportunities they have predicted. There are two main policy components that represent an overall “*Indo Pacific strategy*” (IPS): these are the “Free and Open Indo Pacific” (FOIP) initiative and the Quadrilateral Strategic Dialogue (QSD) (or “quad” for short). Though these are separate entities, they entail numerous important intersections, as will be apparent from the following analysis.

Canberra quickly adopted the “Free and Open Indo Pacific” strategy as it was first championed by Tokyo, and was subsequently followed by Washington and New Delhi. The FOIP is essentially a clear statement of their shared vision of regional security order – designed to uphold freedom of navigation, the rule of law, freedom from coercion, respect for sovereignty, private enterprise, and open markets (with minor variations among the four countries). And while its proponents have been at pains to point out that the FOIP is open to

all countries that subscribe to the principles above, these evidently clash at least in part with Beijing’s preferences regarding the organizing principles for regional security order. To realize such a vision the FIOP seeks to implement a broad approach to security (recognition of “comprehensive security”) aimed at heading-off or tackling a range the Non Traditional Security (NTS) issues issues (mentioned below), but through a combination of enhanced economic interaction/connectivity as well as peace-building the provision of infrastructure, technical assistance, capacity-building, and other Overseas Development Assistance, with the additional aim of contributing to “Human Security” across the region.

The FOIP in many ways serves as a diplomatic expression of the deeper set of shared interests and values that united the quad powers. Australia, Japan and the US are all military allies that seek to avoid the emergence of a hegemonic China in the Asia Pacific, and seek to extend this to the wider Indo Pacific region in the company of their joint strategic partner, India, (tapping into its “Act East” strategy). Periodic efforts (2007, 2017, 2018) to bring India into the existing Trilateral Strategic Dialogue (TSD) between them in the form of a Quad represent an overarching prop to their Indo-Pacific Strategy. The Quad as a putative alignment of these powers has a dual purpose. First, it is aimed at a strategic alignment that acts as a counterweight to rising Chinese power, especially in the Indian Ocean, and into the Western Pacific, potentially, leveraging the joint maritime power of the participants. This potential has serious implications based upon the strategic geography of the Indo Pacific, when one identifies the various “choke points” in the Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) that exist at the nexus of these great Oceans, and upon which each of the quad countries can putatively exercise a degree of naval control. That the economic life blood of trade and energy has to pass through these SLOCs is a vital security consideration to both the quad

parties and to China, which depends upon them so highly. In addition, the Quad, reflecting the stated aims of the FOIP, is animated by closer cooperation on Non-Traditional Security (NTS) issues of common concern, particularly maritime security, terrorism, and humanitarian relief/disaster assistance (capitalizing upon their success in jointly responding to the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami).

Questions remain however as to the cohesion of the quadrilateral front. So far, both India and Australia have been wary of pushing the Quad idea too far, acutely conscious of Beijing's evident displeasure of seeing such a minilateral grouping from which it is inherently excluded. Moreover, though India has strongly supported the FOIP strategy, stressing its ostensible *inclusivity* (i.e. that it is open to China) PM Modi at the 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue neglected to mention the Quad itself, which has more *exclusive* connotations. With this salutatory reminder of New Delhi's fixation on the principle of non-alignment, there is a risk that India, which is in many ways the lynchpin of the whole Indo Pacific Strategy for the trilateral US allies, will unravel the much-hoped for united front. The fact that India has concomitantly acceded to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2017 and retains a strong strategic partnership with Russia (and weaker one with China), might also give pause for thought among the trilateral allies. Indeed, New Delhi appears almost as much a participant in the Chinese vision of the Indo Pacific (described next paragraph) as it is committed to the Quad. Moreover, while IPS is aimed at harnessing putative Indian power to dilute China's influence across a much larger region, it must be remembered that the quad powers themselves have limited resources, and their reallocation to the Indian Ocean means less focus upon the pivotal Asia Pacific core (especially North East Asia) of this broader super-region. In addition, ASEAN ever-conscious of threats to its own "centrality" to the region's security architecture has been leery of the quad and lukewarm in its reception of the

FOIP associated with it.

This is where proponents can be sometimes disingenuous in suggesting that China is central to the Indo Pacific as a concept. It certainly is central to some interpretations of the "region" and the "idea" as the core economic engine that drives both, and a power that will by many estimates tower over the region (sharing some space with India). But as a "strategy" – China has not heretofore been included as a participant country in the FOIP, or admitted to the Quad (even as other countries in South East Asia and even the UK and France have signed up to FOIP and begun to cluster around a looser "quad-plus" concept). Concerned with being excluded or even "contained", Beijing is not fooled by the dissimulation of the idea/region (the Indo Pacific concept) with its manifestation as a quadrilateral geopolitical enterprise, particularly the quad grouping itself.

Although heretofore largely focused upon Eurasian integration (dubbed "China's Eurasian century"), Beijing has more recently extended the "Maritime Silk Road" element of its "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI). Thus, Beijing clearly has its own form of Chinese Indo Pacific strategy (CIPS) – though it does not call it that – aimed at staking out economic/diplomatic/military influence across the region, including port facilities (the so-called "string of pearls") in strategic locations. These harbors, such as Hambantota, Chittagong, and Gwadar, not only provide friendly havens for Chinese vessels, but egression points for the resources/infrastructure of Central Asia into the Indian Ocean, thus connecting its Eurasian and Indian Ocean initiatives. Like the quad powers and their rhetorical socialization process described above, Chinese initiatives occur under the umbrella of an ideological package encompassing the "China Dream" (and "win-win relations" and "harmonious world" etc.). Of course, China can deploy vast resources to back its preferred vision, and has had some success in attracting partners in this enterprise, including in the

Indian Ocean (Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Burma, the Maldives, for example). Thus, Beijing cannot but view the quadrilateral version of the IPS as competitive and potentially threatening to these aims embodied in its own version of an Indo Pacific strategy.

Conclusions

This paper has sought to disaggregate, as far as is practicable, the ideational and material sides of the Indo Pacific concept. It has argued that one must not conflate the objective identification of the Indo Pacific as a pure *concept* (an idea; a region), with the subjective implementation of an Indo Pacific strategy as pursued by aligned countries – Australia, Japan, the US, plus India. The former rest primarily upon ideational bases, whilst the latter is a concrete material representation of state policy. Though the paper has shown how these interlock – the material policy clearly rests upon a “socialization” process that highlights an idea and places it in a newly-designated region, they are not one and the same thing. One can clearly speak of an “Indo Pacific Century” as encompassing the whole area and explicitly

including China in the regional demarcation. This exercise is value-neutral (descriptive), as some of its original architects intended.

However, when we speak of a quadrilateral “strategy” (IPS), this represents a prescriptive policy agenda for the quad powers, not an inclusive concept, as indicated above. True, the FOIP as an articulation of shared values and interests among the four – namely freedom of navigation, rule of law, democratic rule, and market economy – is styled as a common public good for the region. But it must be remembered that this aspiration to uphold a ‘rules-based international order’ largely represents the deeper aims of the quadrilateral alignment and does not therefore necessarily reflect or accommodate China’s vision or preferences (as incorporated in its own distinctive version of CIPS). Though the FOIP maintains its openness to all regional states, it remains unlikely that Beijing will fully endorse or subscribe to the FOIP, whilst its correctly views the more exclusive quad alignment as an incipient “hedge” against its own ambitions, if not outright “containment”.