

From Concept to Contest

David Brewster and Chris Farnham, Guest Editors

Over the last decade the Indo-Pacific has emerged as an important strategic concept. The idea of the Indo-Pacific springs from the observation that fundamental changes in economic and political dynamics of the littoral states of the Pacific and Indian Oceans means that they should no longer be seen as separate theatres for strategic purposes. Rather, major powers are increasingly interacting along the Eurasian littoral and related maritime zones.

The concept of the Indo-Pacific is dynamic, and indeed is still evolving in response to this changing reality. Analysts will disagree where this new region begins and ends and whether it is a 'region' or a 'strategy'.

Chinese official sources tend to deny the existence of the Indo-Pacific, even if China's regional strategy appears to be very much like an Indo-Pacific strategy. In 2013, while the Indo-Pacific was emerging as a concept in several countries, Chinese leader Xi Jinping announced the launch of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. This initiative, the goal of which is to develop infrastructure linking China to foreign markets from Asia to Europe, has been through numerous name changes since, landing on Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

India has been pursuing a 'Look East' strategy for decades to foster its presence in Southeast Asia and other Pacific states. This was later renamed the Act East Policy to emphasise the strength of India's commitment to becoming more active in what was long called the Asia Pacific.

Japan has pursued an Indo-Pacific strategy for more than a decade, ever since 2007 when Shinzo Abe made his landmark speech to the Indian Parliament, talking about the "confluence of the seas". Japan has since developed its own 'Free and Open Indo Pacific' strategy which has been adopted by the United States, at least in terminology.

Australia, too, has been an early adopter of the idea of the Indo Pacific, using it in its 2013 Defence White Paper. Australia's commitment to the so-called 'rules-based order' was later detailed in its 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper.

Several Southeast Asian states have also been building Indo-Pacific strategies, beginning with the 'Global Maritime Fulcrum' concept adopted by Indonesia. More recently, ASEAN has adopted an Indo-Pacific strategy that predictably emphasises ASEAN centrality.

This existence of multiple national strategies indicates multiple and potentially competing agendas. Can such visions cohere to build a cooperative strategy across the fields of security, geo-economics, rules and norms? In March 2019, the National Security College at the Australian National University, with support from the Embassy of Japan, hosted an international conference to consider what a free and open Indo-Pacific means in practice, the barriers to achieving such a reality and the opportunities open to regional actors to develop a shared approach to regional security and prosperity.

Key presenters from this conference were invited to submit contributions to this special issue of the *Security Challenges* journal, which considers the drivers for national strategies, the challenges to regional security and the positions open to states to ensure a free and open Indo-Pacific.

Zack Cooper examines the future Indo-Pacific order. Cooper argues that the future regional order will depend on three critical questions: First, will China's rise continue? Second, will America remain engaged in Asia? Third, will regional states pursue autonomy from the United States and China? These questions may be simple, but their answers are complex and together they can yield significant insights about the Indo-Pacific's future.

Caitlyn Byrne examines the Indo-Pacific and associated ideas of a 'rules-based order' through the lens of a strategic narrative. According to Byrne, it is a contest of leadership, influence and ideas, whereby success is ultimately demonstrated through the ability to set the political agenda, while also framing the rules and terms of compliance for that agenda; thus, shaping the future of regional order in the Indo-Pacific.

Kyoko Hatakeyama considers the roles of norms-based diplomacy in the Asian maritime order. Hatakeyama concludes that although China is keen to increase its financial contributions to international institutions and exhibits a willingness to contribute to economic development around the world, its unilateral claims and its attempts to change the maritime status quo indicate a radical form of contestation of the current maritime order.

Greta Nabbs-Keller looks at ASEAN centrality and Indonesian leadership in a contested Indo-Pacific order. She argues that maintaining the prerogative for shaping the emerging architecture, norms and cooperative initiatives of the Indo-Pacific region is of vital importance to Indonesia, lest external powers seek to bypass ASEAN altogether. Indonesia's exercise of diplomatic initiative and leadership, albeit belated, has seen ASEAN regain the driver's seat on the vision for the emerging Indo-Pacific order. However, critical questions remain about ASEAN's unity and resolve.

Ian Hall looks at Indian conceptions of the so-called 'rules-based order'. He argues that the adoption of the language of the 'Rules-Based Order' is one of the most significant changes to Indian foreign policy brought about by the Bharatiya Janata Party-led government, headed by Narendra Modi. Hall concludes that India's conception of the rules-based order may diverge from the understandings of its strategic partners, but the concept and associated language are now embedded in its avowed vision of how the Indo-Pacific ought to operate and manage security challenges.

Michael Clarke examines China's Belt and Road Initiative in continental Eurasia. He concludes that the shifting regional balance of power suggests that China may achieve its objective of predominance along the "Eurasian continuum" of the Indo-Pacific. This would provide it not only with a "logistical power base" for overland trade, communication and energy/resource access to Central Asia, South Asia and the Middle East but potentially a means of mitigating the effects of the further deterioration of great power relations in the maritime dimension of the Indo-Pacific.

Xue Gong asks whether the Indo-Pacific region has become a battlefield of the US-China rivalry. Xue argues that intense strategic rivalry between China and the United States is likely to occur and intensify in Southeast Asia, largely because both China and United States appear to woo this region for geostrategic influence.

Joanne Wallis looks at Australia's response to China's growing presence among the Pacific island states. She argues that Australia needs to recognise that its approach to the Pacific Islands is frequently counterproductive, particularly when perceived domestic political imperatives generate a disconnect with its stated foreign and strategic policy priority of stepping up its relationships in the region. In addition, Australia must ensure that it strikes a balance between expressing its strategic concerns and respecting the sovereign independence of Pacific Island states.

Huong Le Thu considers ASEAN's perspectives towards the Indo-Pacific. She argues that Southeast Asia has been an important venue for the promotion of the US-version of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy. She then tracks the evolution of Southeast Asian views on the concept, from resistance to reticence and more recently to reaction.

Chikako Ueki looks at Japan's liberal deterrence strategy and the key features of Japan's strategy toward China. Ueki considers if Japan has abandoned engagement and if Japan's new strategy is adequate to achieve its objective of maintaining a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific. Ueki also asks what the cost of maintaining a rules-based order might be, and looks at the role deterrence might play in the Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy.

Jeffrey Wilson looks at competing blueprints for regional connectivity sponsored by the major powers. He notes that much commentary on Indo-Pacific infrastructure diplomacy has focused on the implications of the Belt and Road Initiative. Some analysts have even identified infrastructure as an emerging front in the so-called 'new Cold War' between China and the United States. However, the popular fixation on the BRI ignores the much wider range of infrastructure initiatives at play in the region. Given the economic and strategic importance of connectivity, many governments have launched programs to help close the region's infrastructure gaps. Each offers a distinctive 'blueprint' for regional connectivity, with different goals, governance arrangements and institutional mechanisms. In this way, these blueprints offer competing geo-economic visions for the future of Indo-Pacific economic integration.

These papers are rounded out with a review by Chris Farnham of Hugh White's new book *How to Defend Australia*. Farnham takes a critical look at many of White's arguments and concludes that stimulating discussion is one of White's key aims in addressing how to secure the nation amidst an uncertain regional order.

Together these papers provide a rich resource for readers interested in the evolution of strategies towards the Indo Pacific.