

Asia-Pacific vs. Indo-Pacific: Paradigm Shift or False Choice?

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An anomaly is taking place in international politics. It is the rise of Indo-Pacific geopolitical thinking, abruptly replacing the discourse constructed around the concept of the Asia-Pacific that has persisted for years. As the United States and Japan have initiated the Indo-Pacific strategy, policymakers and scholars in India, South Korea, Australia and most European countries have uncritically accepted the transition to an Indo-Pacific era without any substantial debate about its appropriateness. In the sense of what the philosopher and historian Thomas Kuhn called a paradigm shift, it is quite incomprehensible, because the Asia-Pacific paradigm is still alive and well. I do not see any palpable indicators of anomalies and crises that can justify this transition from an Asia-Pacific to an Indo-Pacific paradigm.¹

The Asia-Pacific order, shaped largely by American unipolarity in the post-Cold War era, has been positive on several accounts. Above all, it has been instrumental in initiating and sustaining open regionalism. Comprising 21 countries from Asia, North and South America, and the Pacific Rim, the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum became a prime platform for free trade and open regionalism. While there have admittedly been a number of challenges, such as disagreements between developed and developing countries on the

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depth and width of free trade, the platform has facilitated a variety of bilateral free-trade agreements as well as sub-regional and regional frameworks for free trade such as the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA), the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Further, the launch of the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) has forged a connection between Asia and Europe, serving as the cornerstone of an inter-regional free trade order. Along with the annual East Asia Summit (EAS) and APEC summit, these have become important forums for political and security deliberations at the highest level.

Although co-operation in the security domain is not as pronounced as in the economic one, the American unipolar moment and its tolerant attitude have contributed to cultivating new discourses on the security order in the Asia-Pacific region. While the US has maintained its regional alliance system, countries in the Asia-Pacific have actively sought the application of the Helsinki process, which is characterised by multilateral security co-operation based on common, co-operative and comprehensive security. ASEAN played a key role in this regard. The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) as well as the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus became open venues for multilateral security co-operation by focusing on preventive diplomacy, confidence-building and conflict resolution. ASEAN was instrumental for institutionalising regular summit meetings among China, Japan and South Korea through the establishment of ASEAN Plus Three. More importantly, the discourse was inclusive by inviting China, Russia and even North Korea. The Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP) 1.5 Track security dialogue was also launched in this context.

Pluralism and decision-making by consensus have served as new norms in the Asia-Pacific region, making exchange and co-operation more vibrant. ASEAN centrality, an unusual concession from big powers, has been another striking feature of the Asia-Pacific order. The Asia-Pacific region is diverse in terms of culture, religion and values. And its political systems also range from mature democracies to autocratic monarchies and communist regimes. Nevertheless, norms for pluralistic co-existence and co-operation have helped overcome this heterogeneity, enabling a relatively long period of peace, stability and prosperity since the early 1990s. The Asia-Pacific regional order has also demonstrated that co-existence between continental and maritime powers is not only plausible but rewarding.

But China's rise has thrown up signal flares to changes in the Asia-Pacific regional order. Realising China's sudden ascension and its associated threats, the US began to realign its grand strategy. In 2011, the Barack Obama administration launched an Asian rebalancing approach to counter China's rise in the name of a "pivot to Asia." Notwithstanding his "Anything but Obama" stance, President Donald Trump formally adopted the Indo-Pacific strategy as an official American strategy in 2017, which is by and large an extension of the pivot to Asia during the Obama era. Unexpectedly, President Biden expanded on Trump's Indo-Pacific strategy by presenting a vision of "an Indo-Pacific that is open, connected, prosperous, resilient, and secure" through a speech at the 2021 East Asia Summit. Japan, South Korea, Australia, some other Asian countries, and most of the EU followed the American lead. All of a sudden, the Indo-Pacific lexicon began to replace that of the Asia-Pacific in government policies, official documents and public debates. But the Indo-Pacific paradigm raises some fundamental and profound questions.

Echoes of a Dark History

First, its intellectual origin is troublesome. In the modern era, the Indo-Pacific strategy was first proposed by former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in a 2007 speech to India's parliament that underscored the meeting of two oceans, the Pacific and the Indian. After that, Abe pursued the Indo-Pacific strategy and succeeded in influencing American leadership, especially Trump. But the very idea of an Indo-Pacific strategy originated, in fact, with Karl Haushofer, a German geopolitical strategist who contributed to the formulation of Adolf Hitler's *lebensraum* strategy. His *Geopolitics of the Pacific* (1924) proposed an Indo-Pacific coalition led by Japan.² What Haushofer had in mind was the marriage of German continental strategy and Japan's Indo-Pacific maritime strategy to counter-balance the colonial dominance of the two oceans by the US, the UK, France and the Netherlands. Abe, who was nostalgic regarding Japan's imperial past, could have been inspired by Haushofer in formulating his Indo-Pacific strategy. Despite Abe's intention to encircle and even contain China through the Indo-Pacific strategy, its intellectual origin could critically undermine its legitimacy.³ Here we witness the irony of history.

Second, while the Indo-Pacific strategy seeks to make the Indian and Pacific oceans "free and open" (according to the US) or "peaceful and prosperous" and presents inclusion, trust and reciprocity as the principles of co-operation (according to South Korea), that strategy is seriously at odds with the Asia-Pacific order. In the economic arena, the strategy is predicated on closed regionalism as evidenced by the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF). The US is pushing its allies and partners to decouple from China in the areas of trade, investment and technology through re-shoring, near-shoring and friend-shoring as well as decoupling and de-risking. Its ultimate goal is to slow down the pace of China's economic growth, while restoring American primacy and economic resilience through close co-operation with its allies and partners in the region.

Third, the most distinctive characteristics of the Indo-Pacific strategy are geopolitical, representing a subtle combination of Alfred Mahan's maritime strategy and Nicholas Spykman's Rimland strategy. Encircling and containing China's expansion is its primary task. The US has been building new security architectures with its allies and partners by not only strengthening trilateral military co-operation among the US, Japan and South Korea, as evidenced by the Camp David trilateral summit in August 2023, but also underscoring the importance of the Quadrilateral Dialogue (QUAD), AUKUS, and the US-Japan-Australian trilateral consultative body. Club-like, exclusive mini-lateral security co-operation mechanisms characterise the new format of the America-led Indo-Pacific security architecture. NATO is also deliberating on its expansion into the Indo-Pacific region through close co-operation with the US, Japan, South Korea and Australia. In its essence, the Indo-Pacific strategy can be seen as the reactionary incarnation of the old Cold War geopolitical strategy of linking the Pacific, Indian and Atlantic oceans, reminiscent of the NATO-CENTO-SEATO-NEATO-ANZUS encirclement of the Soviet Union. The logic of collective defense and

² The book was translated into Japanese in 1942 when Imperial Japan actively pursued its Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere.

³ Hansong Li, "The Indo-Pacific: Intellectual Origins and International Visions in Global Contexts," *Modern Intellectual History*, Vol. 19, No 3 (September 2022), pp. 807-833.

alliance prevails over that of collective security and multilateral security co-operation. The specter of Haushofer's geopolitics is thus haunting the two oceans.

Fourth, the Indo-Pacific strategy purports to be anchored in the common values of freedom, democracy, human rights and rule-based order among like-minded countries. Democratic states are encouraged to form a coalition of democracies to resist the axis of authoritarian states, especially China, Russia and North Korea. The values-based diplomacy that follows a black-and-white logic denies the pluralistic tradition of civilizations and political systems. The revival of value/ideology politics, along with geopolitical strategic divides, further threatens peace, prosperity and stability in the region. This is so more because stable democracies are rather scarce in the region, and new confrontation among the US-led coalition, the authoritarian axis and the new Global South could complicate its geopolitical predicament.

Finally, all this points to the evaporation of "continental Asia" and the rise of a polarised world in the region. While the Indo-Pacific strategy may make a great deal of sense from the perspective of the US, Japan and India, which see the rise of China as an existential threat, other countries in the region might have different opinions. That is especially true when we consider the severe collateral damage that would result from forcing these countries to choose between the two orders. As Cheng-Chwee Kuik aptly points out, they should have "a spectrum of policy options rather than either or dichotomous choice."⁴ But the pressure to choose between the two superpowers is real and intensifying, and the costs of adjustment will be quite high and painful.

Geopolitical Genie

For me, the Asia-Pacific order is still far too beneficial to pen its obituary. And I do not see any obvious reasons why there should be a paradigm shift from Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific. We need to have more open and scrutinized public debates on the transition.

I believe that there are ways for the Asia-Pacific and Indo-Pacific orders to coexist or even thrive together. Each has its own *raison d'être* and we need to avoid a collision between the two. American primacy and exaggerated antagonism against China, Beijing's unnecessarily sensitive and assertive behaviour and the nasty revival of once-taboo geopolitical discourses seem to be the root causes of the current confrontation and the chaotic transition from Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific. There should be concerted efforts to stamp out such trends. The US should get away from inertia-driven "primacy" thinking, while assuring long-term commitment to the region. China should also show more self-restrained, prudent and resilient behaviour. Big powers should make every effort to mitigate unpredictability in their power relations. The international community should come up with innovative endeavours to put the geopolitical genie back into the bottle.

⁴ Cheng-Chwee Kuik, "Shades of Grey: Riskification and Hedging in the Indo-Pacific," *The Pacific Review* (September 2022), doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2022.2110608

The sandwiched states in the region are not destined to take either a pro-American balancing strategy or a “bandwagoning China” approach. There can be other alternative options.

In South Korea, for example, conservative pundits and media favour a pro-US balancing, which refers to taking sides with the existing hegemon, America, to counter the rise of China as a revisionist power. Like realists, they contend that China as a rising power cannot help but be aggressive, and that its re-emergence is a potential and substantive threat to the Korean Peninsula. There is no other choice but to rely on the US by strengthening its alliance with Washington. Meanwhile, those who favour joining the bandwagon argue that it is in the best interests of South Korea to take sides with China. For them, China is rising and the US is declining with a greater possibility of disengagement from South Korea. Backing China means a fundamental geopolitical realignment through which South Korea joins the Chinese sphere of influence. Under this scenario, the South Korea-US alliance would come to an end, and South Korea would likely seek more active military and economic co-operation with China.

In reality, neither option is desirable. South Koreans have been debating about other options such as standing alone, maintaining the status quo by muddling through and transcending diplomacy.⁵ A standalone strategy calls for a more autonomous diplomatic space, breaking away from the influence of the big powers. The right-wing nationalists doubt the reliability of the American nuclear umbrella and its strategy of extended nuclear deterrence and maintain that South Korea should become a middle power with nuclear arms. For them, South Korea’s military independence backed by nuclear weapons is the only way to effectively cope with the North Korean nuclear threat, to manage the whims of big powers, and to ensure national security and dignity. In stark contrast, left-wing progressives advocate a permanent neutral state that is predicated on the withdrawal of American forces from South Korea and the termination of the alliance with the US. Both approaches are neither practical nor feasible. Being too idealistic, they are not likely to gain public support.

The status quo strategy via muddling through seeks a simultaneous pursuit of an alliance with the US and a strategic co-operative partnership with China. Since the days of President Kim Dae-jung, governments in South Korea have followed this strategic line in the name of balanced diplomacy. For those who favour it, the US should remain the top priority as the most valuable ally, but it should not be at the expense of China. They also argue that such double dipping or double hedging is the best way to ensure national security, maximize economic benefits, and balance between national interests and values. The general public seems to support this line of thinking. According to a recent poll, almost 80 percent of respondents showed pro-American sentiments, and less than 15 percent pro-China sentiments. But as for the issue of the South Korea-US alliance vs. balanced diplomacy, 54 percent supported balanced diplomacy between China and the US, whereas 41 percent supported the South Korea-US alliance.

⁵ Chung-In Moon and Sung-won Lee, “South Korea’s geopolitics: Challenges and strategic choices,” *Melbourne Asia Review*, March 18, 2022, melbourneasiareview.edu.au/south-koreas-geopolitics-challenges-and-strategic-choices/

Nevertheless, judged by aggravating Beijing-Washington relations, it would be difficult for Seoul to choose such balanced diplomacy because the pressures from the two big powers narrow the scope of Seoul's diplomatic manoeuvrability. One way to get out of this sandwich dilemma is to deliberate on transcending diplomacy. Paul Schroeder coined the term "transcending" to describe the attempt by weak states to "surmount international anarchy and go beyond the normal limits of conflictual politics; to solve the problem, end the threat, and prevent its recurrence through some institutional arrangement involving an international consensus or formal agreement on norms, rules, and procedures for these purposes.⁶ A transcending diplomacy could be a useful option to mitigate the rivalry and confrontation between China and the US, because it would propose open regionalism, multilateral security co-operation, and the restoration of multilateral regimes to resolve pending issues involving trade, investment, technology, and even climate change and human rights.

South Korea alone cannot initiate this effort. It should work with other middle powers that face a similar dilemma: As Paul Evans suggests, South Korea can foster co-operation with, for example, Malaysia, Australia, and Canada.⁷ Liberal and/or middle-of-the-road states in Europe such as France and Germany could also be included. This group, a coalition of the middle, should work together to forge a new international consensus on norms, principles, rules and procedures to prevent US-China conflicts in geopolitics, geo-economy, technology and values. Most of them are American allies and at the same time major economic partners with China. Their collective action could help China and the US stop their "game of chicken" and restore international order through multilateral co-operation. Geopolitics is not destiny. We can overcome geopolitical destiny through a coalition of the middle and multilateralism.

⁶ Paul Schroeder, "Historical Reality vs. Neo-realist Theory," *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Summer 1994), p.110.

⁷ Paul Evans, "From Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific: What's a Middle Power to do?" The 13th Pok Rafeah Chair Public Lecture, Institute of Malaysian and International Studies, University Kebangsaan Malaysia, March 2, 2023.

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