

Indo-Pacific: Contemporary Understanding of the Strategic System and its Attributes

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Abstract

The transformation of the Asian geostrategic landscape, with the rise of India and China, has led to the emergence of the “Indo-Pacific” as a focal point of geostrategic discourse. Consequently, as the Indo-Pacific has replaced the Asia-Pacific as a strategic region in the mind-map of policymakers, it has become prudent to conceptualise the region as a strategic system and outline its key attributes. This paper explores contemporary understanding of the Indo-Pacific as a strategic system and examines its multipolar configuration. It also highlights the major attributes of this emergent strategic system – the common threat of Chinese revisionism, a regional impulse for the Indo-Pacific, its continental dimensions, and the relative legitimacy of the US’ liberal hegemony in the region – to explain the dynamics of emerging regional security architecture in Asia.

Key Words: Indo-Pacific, Strategic System, Multipolarity, Indo-Pacific, China’s Rise

Introduction

In the twenty-first century, the rise of India and China has caused a profound shift in Asian geopolitics. This transformation of the Asian geostrategic landscape has tremendous implications for regional security architecture, particularly with the emergence of the “Indo-Pacific” as a focal point of regional geopolitics. In this regard, the rise of the Indo-Pacific as a strategic system has naturally coincided with the decline of the Asia-Pacific concept from the global geostrategic discourse. The Asia-Pacific emerged as a geo-economic region that experienced rapid economic growth after the late 1980s. Japan and Australia promoted the term to draw them closer to the United States and the economically burgeoning East Asia (Soesastro & Drysdale 2009). This eventually led to the inauguration of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum in 1989. Thereafter, with increased economic interdependence in the region, dialogue for security cooperation gradually followed economic cooperation (Ikenberry & Tsuchiyama 2002, 69-94). Rory Medcalf describes the Asia-Pacific as a transient idea that arose “to connect Japan and other Asian economies to America and Australia, and to keep Washington engaged across the Pacific even as the end of the Cold War gave it a reason to leave” (2020).

The 1993 Market building reforms in China significantly increased its dependence on the Indian Ocean to transport the energy, resources and trade essential to its prosperity. Similarly, India’s 1991 economic reforms shaped its Look East Policy to integrate its economic and

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strategic interests with ASEAN nations. As Pardesi (2020) highlights, the rise of China and India established the strategic need to rethink Asia in Indo-Pacific terms (124-146). In this regard, the Chinese rejection of President Obama's "G-2" initiative in 2009 generated a significant backlash in the US and led to a reformulation of American strategic priorities in the region (Rachman 2016). It led to a shift away from a "China first" approach to an Asia "pivot", emphasising the growing role of regional powers like India, Japan, and Australia in regional geopolitics. This shift was also captured in then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's speech in Honolulu in October 2010 when she used the phrase "Indo-Pacific" to describe a newly emerged and integrated theatre¹ and underlined the search for an "operational concept" to characterise "America's Pacific Century" (Saran 2011; Clinton 2011).

The gradual phasing out of the Asia-Pacific reflects this transformation of Asia and heralds the re-emergence of a larger Asia in the form of the Indo-Pacific (Pardesi 2020, 124-146). Thus, when Hu Jintao articulated China's "Malacca dilemma" in 2004, he followed a mind map of the Indo-Pacific strategic system in which threats in one part are bound to affect the security of the other. Similarly, the "string of pearls" strategy to build Chinese naval bases, access points and energy infrastructure across the Indian Ocean were an Indo-Pacific solution to China's Malacca dilemma. In this context, it has been argued that the "Asia-Pacific project carried the seeds of its own demise: such a region could not be complete without China, yet China could not rise without looking south and west and across the Indian Ocean" (Medcalf 2020).

The first official documentation of the term 'Indo-Pacific' happened in Australia's 2013 Defence White Paper; its profile increased further in June 2017 during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the White House. The joint declaration issued by the two leaders proclaimed that "as responsible stewards in the Indo-Pacific region", a close strategic Indo-US partnership is "central to peace and stability in the region". In an apparent aim at Chinese activities, the two leaders highlighted their commitment to a "set of common principles for the region", including the freedom of navigation, overflight, and commerce throughout the region and called for peaceful resolution of territorial and maritime disputes (Ministry of External Affairs 2017). Then, during US President Donald Trump's first visit to the Indo-Pacific region, he reiterated his "vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific" during the APEC Summit in Da Nang, Vietnam, in November 2017. He called on regional states to 'uphold principles that have benefited all of us', especially freedom of navigation and overflight and to decisively deal with the threats posed by transnational organised crime, terrorism, cybercrime, and territorial expansion in the region (The White House 2017). It was this unequivocal acceptance of the

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Indo-Pacific framework by the ruling superpower which made it central to the global geostrategic discourse.

Contemporary Understandings of the Indo-Pacific as a Strategic System

A strategic region is “a geographically clustered subsystem ... that is sufficiently distinctive in terms of its internal structure and process to be meaningfully differentiated from a wider international system” (Buzan 2012, 22-46). The regions emerge “out of the threefold interrelationship of politico-military interaction capacity, strategic perceptions of the regional states, and the perceptions and strategic behaviour of the great powers” (Pardesi 2020, 126). Thus, a region is “conceived as an ideational as well as a material construct, existing and acting as a social entity, having its own rules of inclusion and exclusion, with its identity defined in relation to the perceived characteristics of other regions” (Acharya 2013, 24).

As Katzenstein (2005, 43) argues, the US’ power and purpose have played a significant role in the world of regions. Thus, “the United States plays the central role in a world of regions” and “actions that the United States took in the late 1940s were crucial in bringing about the regional institutional orders that have characterised Asia and Europe for the past half century”. The creation of a regional system in the Pacific area to support the regional economic integration of Japan and its Asian neighbours resulted in a Japanese proposal in 1965 to establish the Pacific Free Trade Area encompassing the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. While the proposal did not materialise, various academic and semi-official initiatives, started in 1969, led to the Pacific Economic Cooperation Conference in 1980 to explore and advance free trade and economic cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region.

The emergence of an “Asia-Pacific Way” of multilateralism was rooted in the “conscious rejection by Asian leaders and policy elites of “imported models” of multilateralism, and in their call for multilateralism to conform to local realities and practices” (Acharya 1997, 10). The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) formation in July 1994 reflected the desire among southeast Asian states to retain control over the “agenda-setting” process of regional multilateral institutions (Acharya 1997, 15). In this regard, the end of the Cold War played an important role in the creation of ARF as the region’s former adversaries – ASEAN and Vietnam, Russia and Japan, and China and Russia – began searching for common ground and encouraged multilateral approaches to security issues (Acharya 2013, 232). However, the

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decision-making under ASEAN's centrality was based on the search for the lowest common denominator, and consequently, could only rationalise the obstacles to multilateralism rather than resolve them (Acharya 1997, 16).

ASEAN's incapability to contribute towards an enduring security architecture in the region meant that regional powers like Japan and Australia began conceptualising an alternative geostrategic framework to offset the threats posed by the shift in the regional balance. The possible disruption to the stable balance in Asia was initially captured in the 2001 US Quadrennial Defence Review (QDR) which highlighted the possibility that "the East Asian littoral – from the Bay of Bengal to the Sea of Japan – represents a particularly challenging area" in which "a military competitor with a formidable resource base will emerge" (Department of Defense 2001, 4). The interlinkage of the East Asian littoral with the Indian Ocean was also alluded to in the 2004 Indian Maritime Doctrine, which pointed out "the shift in global maritime focus from the Atlantic-Pacific combine to the Pacific-Indian" (Government of India, 2004, 91).

The organic growth of the Indo-Pacific in global strategic discourse also rests on the ongoing process of Easternisation – the relative shift of power and wealth from the West to Asia (Rachman 2016). As Joseph Nye (2015, 99) pointed out, "From 2001 to 2010, the West's share of the world economy shrank by 10.33 percentage points, more than the combined loss of the previous 40 years". Therefore, as Asia's wealth generation has outstripped the West, more of the world's military power is also being generated in Asia. Thus, total defence spending in the region increased from US\$275 billion in 2010 to US\$423 billion in 2019 (constant 2015 dollars), marking an increase of more than 50% in a decade (IISS 2020, 227).

The Indo-Pacific is seen as a multipolar system marked by the presence of regional powers such as India, Japan, Australia, Indonesia and Vietnam, along with two major powers – the US and China. However, it is important to distinguish between the balanced and the unbalanced multipolar systems. The unbalanced multipolar systems are the ones with three or more great powers, one of which is a potential hegemon. As Mearsheimer (2014) notes, "to qualify as a potential hegemon, a state must have—by some reasonably large margin—the most formidable army as well as the most latent power among all the states located in its region" (44-45). On the other hand, balanced multipolar systems lack a potential hegemon as "power is divided

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rather evenly among the great powers, or at least between the two most powerful states in the system” (269-270).

Imagining a balanced multipolar Indo-Pacific is primarily rooted in the regional insecurity with the unbalanced subsystems of Asia. A regional balance is different from a dominant balance as the latter affects the former much more than the change in regional balance affects the dominant balance. Thus, during the Cold War, the Soviet-US balance was a dominant balance which affected the regional balances of the Middle East, the Indian Subcontinent, and South-east Asia (Bull 2012, 98-99). On the other hand, due to the bipolar configuration of the Soviet-US balance, the ability of regional geopolitics to affect superpower behaviour remained limited. Thus, the Suez Crisis of 1956 or the Indo-Pak wars of 1965 and 1971 did not affect the dominant Soviet-American balance as much as they were affected by Superpower intervention. The victory of North Vietnam over South Vietnam also did not alter the dominant Soviet-US balance, even as it changed the regional balance of power in Southeast Asia. Similarly, the creation of Bangladesh in 1971 shifted the South Asian balance in India’s favour though it had little impact on the overall dominant balance. Among the subordinate balances of the Indo-Pacific strategic system – in East Asia, Southeast Asia, and South Asia – the presence of China as a potential hegemon with the preponderance of power over regional powers makes these regional subsystems unbalanced.

Waltz (1967) notes, “perception of the perils that lies in unbalanced power encourages the behavior required for the maintenance of a balance-of-power system” (215-216). The geostrategic configuration of East Asia as an unbalanced multipolarity explains why Japan has emerged as a foremost proponent of the balancing construct of the Indo-Pacific (Friedberg 1993, 5-33). In 2007, Japanese Prime Minister, Abe Shinzo, in his address to the Indian Parliament, proposed the “Confluence of the Two Seas” – the Pacific and the Indian Oceans – in the form of a “broader Asia” that would eventually “evolve into an immense network spanning the entirety of the Pacific Ocean, incorporating the United States of America and Australia”. Thus, a “Strategic Global Partnership” was envisaged to protect the values such as freedom, democracy and human rights, as well as common strategic interests (Abe 2007). Then in his 2012 article in *Project Syndicate*, he interlinked the peace, stability, and freedom of navigation in the Pacific Ocean with that of the Indian Ocean. Further, he categorically stated that “to improve Sino-Japanese relations, Japan must first anchor its ties on the other side of the Pacific”. To this end, he proposed a “Diamond Quadrilateral” strategy “whereby Australia,

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India, Japan, and the US state of Hawaii form a diamond to safeguard the maritime commons stretching from the Indian Ocean region to the western Pacific” (Abe 2012).

Though not traditionally considered a South Asian power, China’s control of Tibet and its disputed boundary with India in Jammu, Kashmir, and Arunachal Pradesh stretch its influence in South Asia. Further, China’s dependence on the Indian Ocean, as emphasised through its “Malacca Dilemma” and its military alliance with Pakistan, makes it an essential factor in South Asian balance. Therefore, the rise of China and the strengthening of the Sino-Pak axis have created a dyad in the region hitherto considered as India’s traditional sphere of influence. India’s acceptance of the Indo-Pacific framework signifies an increasing preference for a multipolar balance of the Indo-Pacific over the increasingly unbalanced nature of dyadic competition with China in South Asia. Thus, when the pivot to Asia was announced in 2012, India welcomed the US policy even as its cherished notions of strategic autonomy made the accommodation of the US approach difficult¹.

Nonetheless, with the rise of the Indo-Pacific, the Indian position on the South China Sea has changed. India’s traditional position on South China Sea disputes has been to oppose outside intervention by extra-regional powers and encourage bilateral dispute resolution mechanisms (Gupta 2014). However, with acceptance of the strategic framework of Indo-Pacific, India began to express the necessity of the rules-based order and the necessity of freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea also become an important component of its joint declarations with other Indo-Pacific powers (The White House 2014; Ministry of External Affairs 2016). Further, the Indo-Pacific construct has started to shape India’s strategic behaviour in South Asia as can be seen in its facilitation of the US in its relationship with states like Sri Lanka and the Maldives, both of which have been traditionally considered as within India’s traditional sphere of influence in South Asia.

The failure of the “ASEAN Centrality” in countering China’s expansionist claims in the South China Sea, notably the conclusion of an agreeable Code of Conduct, first agreed upon in 2002,

¹ See the comments of T. P. Sreenivasan, India’s former Ambassador and Permanent Representative for India at the United Nations: “we want strategic autonomy. We don’t want to be identified with U.S. policy in Asia, even if we secretly like it”, quoted in Ricks, Thomas. “Why India is so half-hearted about the U.S. rebalance towards Asia.” *Foreign Policy*. 14 Aug. 2012. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/08/14/why-india-is-so-half-hearted-about-the-u-s-rebalance-towards-asia/>

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illustrate the dangers of a severely unbalanced multipolarity of Southeast Asia. The apparent limitation of the ARF, APEC and the East Asian Summit to move from rudimentary confidence-building measures towards preventive diplomacy has provided the impetus to the rise of the Indo-Pacific. Thus, ASEAN's efforts to maintain its centrality in the region's security architecture has led to the region's non-aligned leader – Indonesia – to push for its conception of the Indo-Pacific (Heydarian 2020). Its efforts during the ASEAN Summit in Bangkok in June 2019 led to the adoption of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). Importantly, the AOIP views “the Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean regions, not as contiguous territorial spaces but as a closely integrated and interconnected region” (The Association of Southeast Asian Nations, 2019). Thus, the ASEAN's decision to adopt an Indo-Pacific framework to the security issues as well as its willingness to play a “central and strategic role” in its security architecture, is a significant shift in Southeast Asian geopolitics.

The ramifications of China's rise in the regional subsystems of East, Southeast and South Asia is the most important factor in imagining a multipolar Indo-Pacific. The systemic shocks to regional balance in the South Asia-Indian Ocean Region, Southeast Asia and East Asia due to China's displacement of the world balance have generated considerable fear among regional powers. This is in line with the realist prediction that a strategic system that “contains a potential hegemon is the one that generates the most fear” (Mearsheimer 2014, 269-270). The balancing phenomenon associated with unbalanced systems can be seen with the growing clamour to adopt the framework of the balanced multipolarity of the Indo-Pacific. The creation of Indo-Pacific subordinates the regional imbalances of Asia's regional subsystems and makes a multipolar balance the dominant balance, which includes not only the US and China but also regional powers like India, Japan, Australia and ASEAN. The presence of regional powers, such as India, Japan, and Australia means that even as China continues its path toward economic development and military modernisation, the Indo-Pacific would remain a balanced multipolarity. As Medcalf (2020) notes, “the region's foremost strategic challenges may be China-centric, but the region itself is not”.

Attributes of the Indo-Pacific Strategic System

Threat of the Chinese Revisionism

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Other than a structural pull of the Indo-Pacific, a significant attribute exists in the form of China's unresolved territorial and maritime disputes with its neighbours that contributes to a regional push for the multipolar Indo-Pacific. China's economic and military rise has been associated with its increased assertiveness on the India-China border, in the South and the East China Sea, and with its wolf-warrior diplomacy.

Scholarly estimates differ on the exact time when China's 'peaceful rise' was superseded by its increased assertiveness. Thus, Medcalf (2020) claims "2009 marked the start of a new assertiveness;" Shourie (2013) contends that the post-2008 period saw China's claims becoming "more and more expansive;" Joshi (2011) traces Chinese escalation of territorial disputes in its declaration that defined South China Sea as a "core interest" in 2010 (156-161); and, Shambaugh (2013) calls the year 2010 as a "year of assertiveness." Similarly, Garver (2016) contends that the spike in Chinese intrusions and coercion in Japanese territorial water in 2010 vindicated Beijing's tough posture on its maritime disputes. Chinese scholars like Yan Xuetong (2014) assess that around late 2008, the policy started changing when China moved from Deng Xiaoping's model of keeping a low profile (*taoguangyanghui*) to a more active framework of "to strive for achievement" (*fenfayouwei*) (153-184). Desai (2021) argues that under President Xi, the shift in policy crystallised into an ideology with a broad set of global interests and the political will to pursue them.

It is the expansionist threat of China's rise – with a disputed boundary with India; a willingness to invade Taiwan; competing for sovereign claims with Japan over Senkaku Islands; and the increasing capability to impose a unilateral "nine-dash line" in the South China Sea – that provokes intense fear of China. As Barry Posen (1984, 63) notes, "Those states most often identified as history's would-be hegemon have elicited the most intense balancing behaviour by their neighbours". Further, he points out that "the geographical assets and liabilities of the various actors" (*ibid*) is an important factor that influences their strategic behaviour. Thus, the nations such as the US and Australia balance against China within an Indo-Pacific framework due to the structural push generated by China's rise as a potential hegemon. On the other hand, the fear generated by China's rise, particularly its increased assertiveness to follow its expansionist claims in its neighbourhood – China's threat – is one of the most important attributes of the Indo-Pacific's geopolitics.

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The Japanese PM, Shinzo Abe, in his 2012 article in the *Project Syndicate*, confessed that he failed “to anticipate that China’s naval and territorial expansion would advance at the pace that it has since 2007” (Abe 2012). He pointed out that China’s “coercion around the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea” to “establish its jurisdiction in the waters surrounding the islands as a *fait accompli*” are clear attempts to make the South China Sea a “Lake Beijing” with a restricted Freedom of navigation for others (ibid). These fears of Chinese assertiveness led him to pledge Japan’s capabilities “to the greatest possible extent” for his proposal of the Quadrilateral Diamond initiative with India, Australia and the US.

In the aftermath of the withdrawal of the United States from TPP, Vietnam repetitively sought reassurance from America that it would play a role in maintaining freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. After Trump’s November 2017 Asia tour, Vietnamese leaders unanimously signalled their agreement with Washington’s “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy” to prevent Beijing from further changing the status quo in disputed areas in SCS (Grossman 2018). To counter Chinese activities, Vietnam has also started reclaiming work in eight of the ten rocks it occupies in Spratly Island, West London Reef, and Sin Cowe Island (Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative 2019).

Even Indonesia, which declared itself as a ‘non-claimant’ state in the South China Sea dispute, has increasingly been worried because of Chinese assertiveness on the basis of the nine-dash line. In 2016, there were a series of clashes between the Indonesian Navy and Chinese fishing trawlers in Indonesia’s Natuna Sea Exclusive Economic Zone (Panda 2016). In the aftermath, the Indonesian military signed an MoU with the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources to provide land and maritime security for exploration activities against ‘foreign threats’ (Chandran 2017). In 2017, Indonesia gave an authoritative form to its maritime “fulcrum” as the “Indonesian Ocean Policy”. The fulcrum envisioned the Indonesian Navy as a regional maritime power in the Indo-Pacific. To this end, a large-scale programme of naval modernisation has been undertaken (Agastia 2017). In 2018, during the visit of the Indian Prime Minister, Indonesian President Widodo announced the Shared Vision of India-Indonesia Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific and resolved to achieve a rules-based and inclusive Indo-Pacific (Ministry of External Affairs 2018).

The regional actors sufficiently feel the Chinese threat, real or imaginary. In Southeast Asia, this can also be substantiated by ASEAN’s disregard for the growing threat of the

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nuclearisation of the Indo-Pacific. The US withdrawal from Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in August 2019 occurred not solely over Russia's alleged violations of the treaty but also, as the US Department of Defense's 2018 report had cautioned, due to growing Chinese cruise missile capabilities to target "US forces as far away as Guam" (Department of Defense 2018). Thus, while announcing its withdrawal, Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, called upon both Russia and China to agree to verifiable and enforceable mechanisms for a "new era of arms control" (Pompeo 2019). The Chinese angle became clearer with the Secretary of Defense Mark Esper's visit to the Indo-Pacific Command when he told reporters that the US intends to install ground-based medium-range missiles in Asia (Gibbons-Neff 2019).

In the absence of the necessity of an Indo-Pacific framework, the prospect of a Nuclear Pivot would have faced significant opposition from ASEAN, particularly from the champions of "ASEAN Centrality" like Indonesia and Malaysia, who have played an important role in the signing of the Southeast Asian Nuclear Weapon Free Zone Treaty (SEANWFZ) in 1995. The Indo-Pacific framework influences ASEAN states' prioritisation of a favourable shift in the dominant balance over the threat of a regional arms race. Seemingly irritated, the Russian Ambassador to ASEAN has called such disregard for the change in strategic balance by ASEAN member states a "maleficent delusion" (Ivanov 2020).

However, far from being a mistake, ASEAN's disregard for the prospective change in the region's strategic balance is rooted in the pervasive Chinese threat to its member states' maritime and territorial sovereignty. It is the spectre of Chinese *fait accompli*(s) in the region that shapes the strategic behaviour of regional powers rather than the general shift of relative power. For example, when India conducted its nuclear weapons test in 1998, ASEAN was remarkably muted in its criticism even as US allies such as Japan and Australia raised strong criticism. Further, at the Manila summit in July 1998, some ASEAN countries such as Singapore, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Indonesia reportedly urged Japan and Australia to adopt a more benign attitude towards India (Rehman 2009, 114-143).

A common fear of China's expansionism due to its territorial and maritime claims in the region makes the prospect of a Sino-centric order a survivalist threat to the regional actors. The desire for a rule-based order implies the existence of the threat to commonly accepted rules in the Indo-Pacific. In this regard, when China's displacement of the regional balance is seen in parallel with its revisionist aspirations, this aspect of China's threat in regional perception

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becomes clear. Therefore, a localised anti-China push as well as a structural pull gives Indo-Pacific its peculiar configuration and guides the strategic behaviour of the regional powers. This explains the growing convergence between the US and its treaty allies but also the increasing alignments among regional powers in the Indo-Pacific region.

Regional Impulse for the Indo-Pacific

The emergence of the “free and open Indo-Pacific” vision under the Trump Administration is seen as the US strategy to replace President Obama’s “Rebalance to Asia” in the Asia-Pacific. The official enshrinement of the Indo-Pacific as a unified strategic theatre, as well as China’s characterisation as a “revisionist” power in the US National Security Strategy in 2017, highlights US efforts to contain China’s rise and safeguard the freedom of navigation in the region (Demir 2018, 45-65). Pardesi (2020, 139) argues that the American pursuit of the region’s transformation as the Indo-Pacific effectively dilutes China’s power by making it focus on a larger area to dominate. To the extent “that the Sino-Indian rivalry diverts China’s attention and resources away from the Sino-American rivalry”, it enables the US primacy in the region. Further, it creates a regional status distribution by challenging the dominant “Sino-centric” narrative and setting an alternative discourse that favours the United States. However, the understanding of the Indo-Pacific simply as a product of “hegemonic regionalism” imposed from outside obscures the pervasiveness of the Indo-Pacific as a “cognitive construct shared by persons in the region themselves” (Neumann 1994, 53-74).

The Indo-Pacific as a geostrategic construct differs from the Cold War hegemonic constructs like NATO, SEATO or Warsaw Pact. Though the term has been constructed from the outside with increasing US employment of the term since 2017, it was “imagined” first from inside the region and has been popularised by regional actors like Japan, Australia, and India. The intensified strategic discussion involving Indian and Japanese think-tanks in 2006 over the implications of China’s rise exposed the inadequacy of both Asia and Asia-Pacific constructs (Khurana 2017). This led to the publication of a paper in *Strategic Analyses* by Indian Navy Captain Gurpreet Khurana where he used the term “Indo-Pacific” to refer to the “maritime space stretching from the littorals of East Africa and West Asia, across the Indian Ocean and western Pacific Ocean, to the littorals of East Asia” (Khurana 2007, 139-153). Thereafter, during his October 2007 visit to India, Japanese PM, Shinzo Abe, talked of a “confluence of

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the two seas” to protect the common strategic interests. Further, the 2009 Australian Defence White Paper noted that ‘over the period to 2030, the Indian Ocean will join the Pacific Ocean in terms of its centrality to our maritime strategy and defence planning’ (Government of Australia 2009, 37). It is important to note that when the regional powers began thinking in terms of a two-ocean strategy, the US was still following a “China-centric” strategy for the region with a proposed G-2 with China in 2009.

As the implications of China’s rise became clearer, the Indo-Pacific gained its value in regional strategic discourse. In Australia, the use of the term ‘Indo-Pacific’ in connection with policy formulation became noticeable by 2011–12 (Scott 2013, 425-448). Thus, Australia’s Ambassador to India, Peter Varghese, claimed in 2012 that, “it makes more sense to think of the Indo-Pacific, rather than the Asia Pacific, as the crucible of Australian security... [and]... the centre of gravity of Australia’s economic and strategic interests” (Varghese 2012, 2). This shift was captured in Australia’s National Security Strategy 2013, which adopted the Indo-Pacific framework to emphasise “the growing significance of this geographic corridor and of India” (Government of Australia 2013, 30).

Similarly, by 2011, the Indo-Pacific gained significant currency in Indian strategic discourse. In his article, “Mapping the Indo-Pacific”, retired Indian Foreign Secretary and the then Chairman of the National Security Advisory Board, Shyam Saran, highlighted the Indo-Pacific as a “natural corollary to India’s Look East Policy” (Saran 2011). Subsequently, through increased usage by major Indian think tanks, the Indo-Pacific became part of the governmental vocabulary in dealing with regional strategic realities (Scott 2019, 195-214). In Japan, the return to power of Shinzo Abe in December 2012, saw an increased inclination to strategise along the Indo-Pacific. By 2013, even a non-aligned Indonesia was calling for an ‘Indo-Pacific Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation’, and Indonesian Prime Minister, Joko Widodo conceptualised its ‘Global Maritime Fulcrum’ strategy as a power between the Indian and the Pacific Ocean (Witular, 2014).

Japan’s successful steering of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) after the US withdrawal in January 2017 again highlighted regional support for the Indo-Pacific integration. The TPP was conceived under the Obama Administration to counter China’s Maritime Silk Road and to create the Indo-Pacific Economic Corridor through a multilateral trade framework with US allies and partners around the Pacific Rim, excluding China (Perlez 2015). The TPP was an

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important leverage for Japan to limit China's influence in East Asia (Mulgan 2016, 193-222). Thus, after the US withdrawal from the TPP, Japan assumed the leadership role and galvanised the remaining 11 members to conclude the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) in March 2018.

Similarly, even as the Trump Administration enforced protectionist policies against allies and adversaries alike, the Indo-Pacific remained central to the geostrategic outlook of regional powers: Japan unveiled its free and open Indo-Pacific strategy during the Africa Summit in 2016; India led the opposition to the inaugural BRI forum in 2017; and, Australia released its 2017 white paper which framed an Indo-Pacific strategy to achieve a favourable balance in the region. Similarly, France called for “the Paris-Delhi-Canberra axis” in 2018 to “together define a joint strategy for the Indo-Pacific, with a concrete roadmap of objectives and actions” (Mohan, Medcalf & Tertrais 2018).

After initial emphasis on the Pacific and Asia-Pacific, the US reimported the Indo-Pacific rhetoric into its strategic discourse in September 2017, when in his meeting with the Indian Defence Minister, US Secretary of Defense, Jim Mattis, highlighted the need for a strong rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific (Department of Defense 2017). Since then, the Indo-Pacific discourse has seen a constant uptick. Thus, during his November 2017 Asia tour, President Trump outlined “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” strategy in Vietnam, which was enshrined in the National Security Strategy 2017. Further, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) between Australia, India, Japan and the US was resuscitated in November 2017 to promote the concept of a free and open Indo-Pacific. The Quad was first formed in 2007 but disintegrated soon after China strongly opposed the four nations' security consultations. Most analysts believe that China's escalatory coercive behaviour in the region after 2015 raised the threat perception and facilitated the re-emergence of Quad. Arguably, what differentiates Quad 2.0 from its predecessor is the presence of a well-developed strategic construct of the Indo-Pacific in the geostrategic imagination of regional powers. Therefore, while Quad 1.0 had a vague premise of countering China, Quad 2.0 instead focuses on maintaining a strategic balance in a multipolar Indo-Pacific. This allows the regional powers to highlight the “free and open” aspect of the Indo-Pacific rather than a deliberate anti-China coalition.

It has been argued that the increased usage of Indo-Pacific terminology among regional powers is an “evolution of parallel perspectives, albeit with some cross-fertilisation, rather than a

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formal coordination of positions” (Medcalf 2016). While this certainly points towards the organic growth in the early stages of the conceptualisation of the Indo-Pacific, the post-2017 coordination between the regional powers is striking. The Chinese technological giant, Huawei, came under scrutiny in 2019 after the US began a global movement against Huawei’s 5G technology rollout. However, Australia had laid the groundwork to expose Huawei’s threat to critical infrastructure, eventually banning it in July 2018 (Bryan-Low & Packham 2019). It then shared the findings of its signals intelligence with the US which initiated a global movement against Huawei. By the end of 2019, most US allies had banned Huawei from participating in 5G trials in their countries. US and Japan have also partnered to provide high-quality energy infrastructure for emerging Indo-Pacific clients. If Australia took a lead in raising the dangers of Huawei 5G technology, it is India that raised concerns over Chinese app Tiktok’s control of data, ultimately banning it in June 2020. This was followed with the Trump Administration’s decision in August 2020 to force its parent company ByteDance to sell its American operation to a US-based entity.

The construct of Indo-Pacific grants significant agency to regional powers to influence the future of a multipolar Asia. Rather than being an externally imposed regional construct, the bottom-up demand for the Indo-Pacific ensures multipolarity. In a desire for such a multipolar order, the US has been a follower of the regional push for the logic of the Indo-Pacific.

Continental Dimension of the Indo-Pacific

The strong support towards the Indo-Pacific by the region’s maritime powers – Japan, Australia, and the US – has given the strategic region a predominant maritime orientation. Japan’s initial championing of the concept as the “confluence of two seas” in 2007, and Australia’s identification of a strategic region joining the Indian and the Pacific Ocean in its Defence White Paper in 2009, have shaped the development of a strong maritime identity for the Indo-Pacific. Further, the importance of ASEAN centrality in the regional geopolitics, as well as the US involvement as an offshore balancer in the region, contributes towards the maritime identity of the Indo-Pacific. However, unlike the predominantly maritime imagination of the geo-economic Asia-Pacific, the Indo-Pacific also has a prominent continental dimension.

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The India-China interactions along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the Himalayas have an important bearing on the Indo-Pacific geopolitics. This aspect of the Indo-Pacific geopolitics was evident during the 73-day long India-China standoff at Doklam in June 2017. As China increased its military and diplomatic pressure, India hosted the largest ever Malabar exercise in July 2017 in the Bay of Bengal with the US and Japan (The Hindu, 2017). New Delhi also moved ahead into resuscitating Quad, after years of recalcitration, in November 2017 with the US, Japan, and Australia. Similarly, after the Sino-Indian border flareup in 2020, New Delhi recalibrated its commitment to the balancing construct of the Indo-Pacific. Thus, since May 2020, following the skirmishes between the Indian Army and the PLA in Ladakh, India has enhanced its external balancing in the Indo-Pacific. This has included “passage exercises” with the US in the Andaman and Nicobar archipelago; second-ever ministerial meeting of the Quad; invitation to Australia to join the Malabar exercise; summit level meeting of the Quad leaders in Washington; and, the finalisation of the sale of Brahmos missiles to the Philippines, among others.

In so far as India-China border tensions shape New Delhi’s geostrategic priorities, they are one of the most significant elements of its Indo-Pacific strategy. Importantly, India’s decision to facilitate the US influence in Sri Lanka and the Maldives is a significant departure from its traditional policy of limiting the intervention of external powers in South Asia. This acceptance of the balancing nature of the Indo-Pacific in New Delhi indicates a growing operationalisation of the concept as an integrated strategic system between the Indian and the Pacific Oceans.

In this regard, though the term ‘Indo-Pacific’ is relatively novel, the concept has been operational since the rise of the British Empire. The British Empire, with its rule over the Indian Subcontinent had strong Indo-Pacific interests. Pardesi (2020) contends that an integrated strategic system stretching from “Calcutta to Canton”, including “the Indian Ocean and the East Asian littoral”, emerged after Britain commanded India’s finances and manpower (127). Thus, Indian resources were instrumental in the British conquest of Burma, victory in the Opium Wars, and power projection in and around China. The imperial importance of India was recognised by the Indian Viceroy, Lord Curzon, as the “pivot and center of the British Empire” (128). Further, with the recognition of the distinction between the “defense of India” and “imperial interests”, “an India-centred strategic region in the Indian Ocean and East Asia” began to be imagined from London (128).

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The Treaty of Chushul signed between Qing China and the Sikh Empire in September 1842 reflected the unity of strategic Asia as it came just a month after the signing of the treaty of Nanking. The treaty terminated the Sino-Sikh War and stipulated that both sides would recognise ancient boundaries between Ladakh and Tibet and trade in tea and cloth would continue like before (Department of Information & International Relations of Tibet, 1952). This reflected the concerns of both Qing China and the Sikh Empire over the rise of British India under the East India Company which was attempting hegemony in the subcontinent as well as in the maritime stretch of the Indo-Pacific. As India's EAM, S. Jaishankar, noted, "the British Empire operated its own version of Indo-Pacific even if it was not free or open", and it was the "visualisation of both resources and interest across an integrated zone", which explains "many of the events of the 19th and 20th Century" (Jaishankar 2019).

In the 21st century, countering China's "all-weather" partnership with Pakistan has become India's primary strategic priority. Particularly, the threat of a two-front war due to the operationalisation of the Karakoram Highway, and the strategic ramifications of the China-Pakistan economic corridor, upon Indian sovereignty highlight the continental dangers faced by New Delhi. Therefore, unlike the maritime priorities of other Indo-Pacific powers, the bearing of India's continental dilemmas upon its strategic priorities gives the Indo-Pacific an important continental dimension.

Indo-Pacific and the Legitimacy of the US' Liberal Hegemony

This rise of China has highlighted the questionable nature of the US security guarantees in the region. The Chinese seizure of Scarborough Shoal from the Philippines in 2012 showed regional powers the implications of the US' flagging commitments in the region. Similarly, US willingness to safeguard Taiwan in the event of the Chinese invasion has also been called into question (Carpenter 2020). On the other hand, an alternative ordering principle has been advanced that argues that 'East Asian regional relations have historically been hierarchic, more peaceful, and more stable than those in the West' (Kang 2003, 66). As Samuel Huntington (1996) emphasised, "Asians generally are willing to 'accept hierarchy' in international relations, and European-type hegemonic wars have been absent from East Asian history". Thus, the "Sino-centric" nature of the East Asian relations "contrasts dramatically with the European balance of power model" (Huntington 1996, 234-235).

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Certain strategic thinkers such as Kishore Mahbubani contend that the European balance of power approach is “strategically incoherent while East Asia is making relatively sound strategic decisions”. The psychological revolution of the “East Asian minds”, due to its increasing economic and technological development, has imparted it the confidence to “succeed in its own right” and made it foolish to “engage in traditional military rivalries.” Therefore, while “the Atlantic believes in building strong institutions”, the ‘Asians accept hierarchy’ and are ‘creating networks’ of personal contacts and trust-building to realise their Pacific impulse (Mahbubani 1995, 105-120).

The narrative of a Sino-centric hierarchical system presents a *fait accompli* to the regional powers. As retired PLA officer, Liu Mingfu, contends, “If equal powers were scrambling for power, peace would be impossible”, therefore, China’s dream to become the “world’s leading nation” by gaining economic and military superiority over its rivals would be “a necessary step for the progress of history”. Thus, China, with its “most excellent cultural gene” and the “experience to lead the world”, will usher in the “age in which China enriches the world” (Mingfu 2015). The attempts to present “an essentialised Chinese civilisation that is culturally determined to rule Asia” have been labelled as ‘Sino-speak’ (Callahan 2012, 33-35). Further, the “Pacific impulse” of the East Asians has been dismissed as “a little like the trendy talk of Confucian social values”. As Barry Buzan and Gerald Segal note, it requires “a huge dose of amnesia to forget the ways in which Pacific Asian culture settled disputes not too long ago” (Buzan & Segal 1995, 82-14). Similarly, Aaron Friedberg (2000) argues that the alleged culture of conciliation and conflict avoidance has failed to prevent numerous civil and inter-state wars involving China, Cambodia, Indonesia, and Vietnam (147-160).

Scholars like Zhang (2014) also expose the limits of the utility of the tribute system in understanding historical East Asian politics. The propagation of the tribute-system narrative misleads and masks other important institutional dynamics such as “rival equality” that operated in tandem with the “imperial suzerainty” system in East Asia (31-50). Importantly, the projections of a tribute system onto the future security arrangements in East Asia overlook the dynamics of the Westphalian nation-state system prevailing in the region. In the age of competing nationalisms, the respect for Chinese preponderance cannot transpire into a hierarchical subordination to China. Therefore, states like India and Vietnam may agree that China as a preponderant power enjoys higher status, but this does not lead them to believe that

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the Chinese nation is superior to theirs. That both of these states have fought border wars with China over the question of territorial sovereignty is illustrative of this fact.

Therefore, the increase in anti-China sentiment in the region runs parallel to China's increased assertiveness in the South China Sea. Thus, anti-China protests have periodically rocked states like Vietnam and the Philippines; further, a persistent anti-China sentiment is on the rise in states like India and Indonesia (BBC 2014). The Pew Poll survey 2019 pointed out this sharp decline in China's favourable perception among the Indo-Pacific nations (Pew Research Center 2019). The survey showed that in the Indo-Pacific, 79% believe that China's growing military might be bad for their country, up from 43% in 2007. In contrast, the attractiveness of US power in the region has been corroborated by the 2018 PEW survey, which showed that 73% of Asian respondents – represented by polls taken in Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Australia – favoured the United States as the leading global power versus 12% for China (Delaney 2018).

The regional preference for the rule-based “order” in the Indo-Pacific stems from the benevolent aspects of the US hegemony. The regional peace which was “the envy of most of the world” was a product of the common good that the US uninterruptedly served in the region since the Second World War. It produced unprecedented growth for many nations including Japan and the Tiger economies of Asia. Further, its network of “hub and spoke” alliances in the region has provided a favourable strategic context to the ongoing process of Easternization. The regional leaders such as Lee Kuan Yew believed in “a widely held consensus” that US presence is a “force for peace and stability in the region” (Allison, Blackwill & Wyne 2018). Similarly, Ikenberry and Tsuchiyama (2002) note that US hegemony is acceptable to the extent that it is institutionalised through bilateral alliances and regional agreements (69-94).

The growing US-Vietnam strategic partnership is a prime illustrator of why regional powers prefer the “balancing wheel” role of the US over a Sino-centric order (Alagappa 1991, 269-305). In its thousands of years of history, Vietnam has fought only one war against the United States, but seventeen against the Chinese (Rachman 2016). In November 2017, President Trump unveiled Washington's free and open Indo-Pacific strategy in Vietnam. This was followed by a landmark port call of the USS Carl Vinson at Da Nang in March 2018 – the first such visit since the end of the Vietnam War in 1975. Thus, Vietnam's 2019 Defence White Paper highlighted “historical divergences” with China on the issue of maritime sovereignty while expressing its intention ‘to participate in security and defense cooperation mechanisms

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... in the Indo-Pacific region' (Grossman & Sharman 2019). Thus, the growing divergence with China and a strong acceptance of the US' security role in the region highlight Vietnam's strategic preferences in the Indo-Pacific.

In the post-cold war period, fears of US departure from Southeast Asia were quite prominent (Acharya 2013, 230-33). The ASEAN felt grave suspicions about the prospects of a unilateral Japanese security posture which could have provoked China, thereby creating a new security dilemma in the region. These fears were instrumental in the ASEAN's embrace of a wider Asia-Pacific and the creation of ARF in 1992. The rise of China as a military power, however, brings the prospects of the dreaded great power rivalry to the doorstep of ASEAN. This change in the region's structural configuration has pushed ASEAN to redefine its centrality, as the unipolar moment has given way to a multipolar Indo-Pacific. In this regard, the adoption of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific marks the recent attempt to bed out the ASEAN centrality in the emerging security architecture of the Indo-Pacific.

The construct of the multipolar Indo-Pacific alters the context of China's rise, it changes the strategic discourse – from Communist China's emergence as *Zhongguo*, the Central state – to the re-emergence of a geostrategic region between the Indian and the Pacific Oceans². In the Indo-Pacific framework, China is just one of the great powers in the system, not the system itself. The inclusion of India in contemporary strategic Asia also fractures the Sinocentric discourse as historical Indian polities were not a part of the Sinocentric world (Pardesi 2020, 139). In the Indo-Pacific, most regional powers view the US “as a resident power that has vital interests in the region” underpinning regional security and stability (Loong 2020). It is instructive to note that the US legitimacy in the region rests not only on its soft power but as an underwriter of regional security architecture. The growing regional alignment with the US-backed “free and open Indo-Pacific” construct is striking in this aspect. The US itself is not a signatory to the UNCLOS treaty, yet it prevails in pushing the ‘freedom of navigation’ discourse in the South China Sea. The legitimacy of the US centrality in the regional security architecture – as opposed to China's preference that “Asia should be managed by Asians” – is an important attribute of the Indo-Pacific geopolitics.

² The use of the term *Zhongguo* by the Chinese state to represent itself in the contemporary world was not in use as a formal name by the end of the nineteenth century. Its use in the past was intended to confer legitimacy to the ruling regime. To construct the Chinese nation-state, modern nationalists adopted the idea of *Zhongguo* as the Central State which further made it central to modern Chinese identity. See Hayton, Bill. *The Invention of China*. Yale University Press, 2020.

Conclusion

The Indo-Pacific construct provides a loose unity of purpose to the regional powers like India, Japan, Australia, and the ASEAN. By acknowledging the geostrategic space of the Indo-Pacific and through its legitimisation with “free and open Indo-Pacific”, the regional powers accept the threat of China’s regional hegemony. In this regard, the “free and open Indo-Pacific” slogan was unveiled by Japanese PM Abe in Africa in August 2016. Then, during Prime Minister Modi’s Japan visit in November 2016, both leaders underscored the potential for deeper bilateral cooperation and synergy between India’s “Act East Policy” and Japan’s “free and open Indo-Pacific” strategy. After the US, as an offshore balancer, adopted the “free and open Indo-Pacific” as part of its Indo-Pacific strategy in 2017, the phrase became synonymous with the efforts to promote regional stability in the Indo-Pacific. Therefore, the terminology of the “free and open Indo-Pacific” at once both engraves the mental map of the Indo-Pacific in the regional perception and underlines the need for a rule-based order in the multipolar strategic system.

The Indo-Pacific’s biggest challenges – the India-China border dispute, China’s claims over the South and the East China Sea, and the threat to Taiwan’s independence – underscore the need to safeguard regional stability from the growing appetite of a potential hegemon. The growing efforts to institutionalise numerous minilateral and multilateral arrangements in the Indo-Pacific are indicative of this fact. However, the domination of China in the Indo-Pacific discourse, and its absence from the nascent regional institutionalisation process, continues to underline the necessity of peculiar regional security architecture in the Indo-Pacific.

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