

EXPERT COMMENTARY

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China's 'Two Ocean' and the West's Indo-Pacific Strategies – Thrust and Riposte in a Geopolitical War of Words?

Traditionally, any grouping of countries, geographical regions or entities is founded on some homogeneity, either of origin or of purpose. The homogeneity could be based on geographic, oceanographic, geopolitical, geostrategic, geo-economic, security-related, cultural, linguistic, ethnic, civilizational, biogeographic, climatological or environmental factors. When one or more of these factors overlap, the grouping becomes stronger – the example of NATO, G7 and the EU are classic examples of groupings with multiple commonalities, and hence greater resilience and unity of purpose.

While the Indo-Pacific region may seem to be too vast for any homogeneity, as the Indian and the Pacific Oceans, together encompass over 50% of the earth's surface (excluding the land masses of their littorals) (International Hydrographic Organization 1953); from a maritime geography point of view, the Indian and Pacific Oceans can be seen as 'conjoined oceans', connected by the umbilical of Southeast Asia. Consequently, there has always been greater biogeographic, oceanographic, climatological and civilizational interplay between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, as compared to the Atlantic region, where the barriers imposed by the continental land masses of the Americas and Africa, have reduced this substantially. Examples of this close interaction include the similarity and richness of ocean species in the Indo-Pacific region and climatological phenomena such as the El Nino/ La Nina Southern Oscillation (ENSO) in central and eastern equatorial Pacific (World Meteorological Organization 2022), which is closely linked with the development of monsoons in the Indian Ocean, and directly impacts the lives of people on the Indian sub-continent. The various straits that link the Indian and Pacific Oceans have also facilitated maritime interaction between the two oceans since time immemorial, exemplified by the spread of Buddhism in Southeast and East Asia from ancient India, as far east as Japan.

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Essentially a geopolitical formulation in its current form, the Indo-Pacific region today is generally understood to comprise the tropical waters of the Indian Ocean, the western and central Pacific Ocean and the seas connecting the two oceans, including, of course, the littorals of this ocean area. There are variations to this broad understanding, which are discussed in the next two sections of this essay.

The Indo-Pacific Formulation by the West

The earliest espousal of the Indo-Pacific as a distinct region stems from Weimar Germany's concept of an anti-colonial India and Republican China as German allies against Euro-America (Hansong 2021), described in detail in German political oceanographer Karl Hausopher's work, '*Indopazifischen Raum*' (Indo-Pacific region), written in the 1920s. In the 21st century, the coming into vogue of the term 'Indo-Pacific' has been first ascribed to the Japanese Prime Minister's address to the Indian Parliament in August 2007, titled '*Confluence of the Two Seas*', where he referred to the dynamic coupling between the Indian and Pacific Oceans as seas of freedom and prosperity" (Abe 2007). This address was preceded by a paper published by the Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA) in January 2007 in collaboration with the Japan Institute of International Affairs (JIIA) (Kharana 2021).

The term gained traction in the West in the 2010s and the Trump Administration in the United States (US) included the Indo-Pacific construct in its National Security Strategy released in December 2017, defining the region as 'stretching from the west coast of India to the western shores of the United States', with three priority action areas: political; economic; and military and security (The White House 2017). In May 2018, the US also renamed its largest and oldest combatant command, the Pacific Command (PACOM), as the Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM), though the geographical boundary in the Indian Ocean has been retained at 68 degrees East, as was the case with the PACOM, which excludes the Western Indian Ocean (WIO) from its Area of Responsibility (AoR) and divides it between the US Central Command (CENTCOM) and the US Africa Command (AFRICOM). The latest document was promulgated by the Biden Administration on 11 February 2022 is the '*Indo-Pacific Strategy*', which envisions the Indo-Pacific region as encompassing 'Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia, to South Asia and Oceania, including the Pacific Islands' (The White House 2022).

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Interestingly, the US strategy also mentions the Euro-Atlantic as a complementary region to the Indo-Pacific.

Europe has not been too far behind the US in adopting the Indo-Pacific concept. In May 2018, the French President set out the French strategy for the Indo-Pacific region, which was formally promulgated as a policy document in February 2022 (Government of France 2022). Germany also promulgated a set of '*Guidelines on the Indo-Pacific*' in September 2020 (Government of Germany 2020). The European Union (EU) promulgated its '*Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific*' on 16 September 2021 and defined the region as 'spinning from the east coast of Africa to the Pacific Island States' (European Union 2021).

China's 'Two-Ocean' Concept

The Indo-Pacific concept has been consistently opposed by China, but what is not very commonly known is that the Indo-Pacific formulation was also adopted by China in 2004, though under a different name, as the '*Two-Ocean*' strategy. This coincided with China's maritime revival, and in its 2004 Defence White Paper, China announced a shift in its maritime strategy from '*near seas defence*' to '*far seas operations*' with the long term aim of achieving the '*command of the seas*' (Ibid). After 2005, the 'Two-Ocean' strategy also began to appear in Chinese literature as a pre-conceptualised project set by the Communist Part of China (CPC) (Sun and Payette 2017).

The Two-Ocean strategy was expanded in an important policy document, '*Science of Military Strategy*', published by China's Academy of Military Sciences in 2013, which stated that China's national interests have 'surpassed the traditional territorial land, territorial sea and territorial air space to continuously expand toward the periphery and the world, continuously extending towards the ocean, space and electromagnetic space'. It went on to state that 'the main war threat has switched from the traditional inland direction towards the ocean direction', the People's Liberation Army (PLA) 'must expand its military strategic view and provide strong and strategic support within a greater spatial scope to maintain national interests' (Academy of Military Sciences of the People's Liberation Army of China 2013). The document described the 'Two-Ocean' region as 'mainly including the Pacific Ocean, Indian Ocean, as well as the littoral regions of neighbouring Asia, Africa, Oceania, North America, South

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America and Antarctica, spanning 50% of the globe and 71% of the global ocean area' (Academy of Military Sciences of the People's Liberation Army of China 2013 247). It deemed the 'Two-Ocean' region extremely important for China's security interests, representing 'a crucial area in influencing China's strategic development and security in the future, as well as the intermediate zone of our entrance into the Mediterranean Sea and Arctic region'.

The fact that China's maritime strategy aims to not only build up its maritime military power, but more importantly, use that power to secure resources, trade routes, export markets and overseas bases for the eventual realisation of the Chinese Dream, is best exemplified by China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The maritime leg of the initiative was announced in October 2013, while on a visit to Indonesia, when the Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed "greater connectivity with ASEAN countries... (and) develop maritime partnership.... to build the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR)" (ASEAN China Centre 2013). Less than a month earlier, he had laid out the broad concept of a land-centric Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) in his September 2013 address at the Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan (Xinhua 2013). It is to the German founder of modern geography as an academic discipline, Ferdinand Freiherr von Richthofen (1833-1905), that we owe the term 'die Seidenstrasse' or Silk Roads, which he coined to specifically describe the myriad routes crossing Inner Asia, linking Han China with the Roman West, as also maritime routes existing for trade between the South China Sea and the Roman Empire, via India and the Indian Ocean (Waugh 2007). China has cleverly arrogated this historical concept to meet its modern ends. It is not surprising that the map of the MSR promulgated by China lies entirely within the 'Two-Ocean' region described in the '*Science of Military Strategy (2013)*'.

Contrasting Strategic Visions for the same Region

While the geographical expanse of the Indo-Pacific region is broadly the same between China and the West, their strategic visions are very different. The United States frames its vision in terms of five objectives: advance a free and open Indo-Pacific; build connections within and outside the region; drive regional prosperity; bolster Indo-Pacific security; and build resilience to transnational threats. The EU strategy has outlined seven priority areas, largely similar to the objectives listed by the US: sustainable and inclusive prosperity; green transition; ocean

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governance; digital governance and partnerships; connectivity; security and defence; and human security (EU 2021 6).

The fact that both the US and the EU strategies are aimed right and centre at China is clearly evident. The US strategy states that, 'The intensifying American focus is due in part to the fact that that the Indo-Pacific faces mounting challenges, particularly from the PRC. The PRC is combining its economic, diplomatic, and technological might as it pursues a sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific and seeks to become the world's most influential power' (The White House 2022 5). While the EU Strategy for the Indo-Pacific is more guarded in naming China, the emphasis on an open and rules-based regional security architecture leaves no room for doubt about who is obstructing such a security architecture. Both the US and the EU strategy formulations can, therefore, be seen as geopolitical and geo-economic counters to China's Two-Ocean strategy.

While the western formulation frames a future Indo-Pacific in terms of a multilateral, inclusive and democratic region, China's Two-Ocean strategy looks at the area purely from its own national security and economic prosperity point of view. On this basis it wants 'Chinese actors to create conditions to 'establish ourselves in the Two-Ocean region, participate in resource extraction and space utilisation of the oceans, and boost development in the two Polar Regions'. The document expects traditional and non-traditional 'security threats' to oppose this sweeping geostrategic expansion (Academy of Military Sciences of the People's Liberation Army of China 2013 247), thereby building a rationale for further concerted qualitative and quantitative development of their Armed Forces, especially their Navy, for years to come (Erickson 2019 253). The Two-Ocean strategy is part of China's Grand Strategy to supplant the US as the premier world power by 2049, the year the People's Republic of China (PRC) completes its centenary of formation. As part of its strategy, China seeks to build a set of client states across the region, which would be partially or wholly dependent on China. However, its unilateral approach, which stems from its 'Middle Kingdom' complex, is inherently flawed. The absence of any homogeneity, other than dependence on China, can never be the basis for a strong alliance, certainly not one required to dominate a region as vast and diverse as the Indo-Pacific. The example of the US, which has been the leading power in the Indo-Pacific since the end of World War II, in alliance with like-minded treaty partners such as Japan, South Korea and Australia, as also Major Defence Partners (MDP) such as India, amply illustrates this reality.

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The recent invasion of Ukraine by Russia, and the developing China-Russia axis after their Joint Statement in February 2022, has introduced a new equation into the Indo-Pacific by re-focusing attention on the Asia-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic. The Ukraine war is a win-win situation for China, and it is evident that China seeks a weakened Russia as a junior partner and a source for cheap raw materials in its quest to dominate the world. Besides, the conflict would distract the current US focus from the Indo-Pacific, as was the case during the Cold War, thereby giving China a freer rein in the region. If this indeed comes into being, as seems likely, it would, for the first time, provide China with a strong ally to pursue its Grand Strategy to realise the 'Chinese Dream'. Whatever the outcome, the importance of the Indo-Pacific region is unlikely to diminish in the decades ahead.

** Vice Admiral Anil Kumar Chawla joined the National Defence Academy in Jan 1978. Commissioned in the Indian Navy on 01 Jan 1982, he specialised in Navigation and Direction in 1988 and subsequently navigated two of the Navy's frontline frigates. His five sea commands include Coast Guard Ship C-01 in 1986-87, INS Vinash (which he commissioned) from 1992-94, INS Kora from 2001- 02, INS Tabar from 2006-07 and INS Viraat from 2008 to 2010. On promotion to the rank of Vice Admiral he took over as the Director General Naval Operations on 31 Dec 2014. He took over as Flag Officer Commanding-in-Chief Southern Naval Command, Kochi on 31 Jul 18. He has participated in Op Pawan in Sri Lanka in 1989 while on board INS Arnala and was commended for gallantry by FOC-in-C East. He was awarded the Nausena Medal in 2003 while in command of INS Kora during Operation Parakram. Vice Admiral Chawla was conferred the VishishtSeva Medal on 26 Jan 13 and the AtiVishishtSeva Medal on 26 Jan 2015 for distinguished service. He was conferred with the honorary title of Aide-De-Camp to President of India in 01 Dec 2019. He was awarded the ParamVishishtSeva Medal for distinguished service of the highest order on 26 Jan 2020.*

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