

The Evolving Indo-Pacific Region: An Introduction to External Perspectives on Africa's Role and Position

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Abstract

This article explores the evolution of the 'Indo-Pacific' as a concept and geopolitical social construct. Since 2007, the concept has been framed predominantly to fit the geostrategic concerns of global North powers. Contrary to this slant taken by an array of recent Indo-Pacific strategies, the concept itself is historically rooted in ideas of anti-colonial politics, social justice, developmentalism, and cooperation. Regional Security Complex (RSC) theory is applied as a useful conceptual framework and shows how security problems and concerns are intimately tied to others and are thereby relational. Indeed, such a theory will need to increasingly account for ocean regions and move away from a terra-centric focus. Finally, the article explores the role of political geography. While the security complex in this mega-region is defined by particular states, the physical boundaries remain open to interpretation based on a state's view of itself and its geography, as well as how it makes sense and projects its changing interests. It is for these reasons that the western Indo-Pacific and African littoral states remain unevenly accounted for.

Keywords: Indo-Pacific, political geography, Belt and Road Initiative, Regional Security Complex, Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), Indian Ocean, ocean regions



1. Introduction

Over the past several years, and at least since Japanese prime minister Abe's 2007 'Confluence of the Two Seas' address to the Indian Parliament, the concept 'Indo-Pacific' has become part and parcel, and some would say the foremost exemplar, of the much-touted 'geopolitical power shift from West to East'. Policies and strategies on the Indo-Pacific abound, and scholarship on the topic has grown in leaps and bounds. In our current era, the Indo-Pacific is both a geographical region drawing the attention and interest of major powers with political and economic interests in the area, and a geopolitical social construct that delineates the geographical region into a sphere of interest subject to the geostrategic concerns of global North powers. An example of the former is the maritime dimension of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), focused on (re)building historical trade networks, among them sea routes. The latter is characterised by the Quad (the minilateral between the US, Japan, India, and Australia) and AUKUS (a trilateral with Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States as members), with the 'Indo-Pacific' as a geopolitical construct, a 'name' that is appropriated by these countries and turned into a construct in the sense that a number of different, and sometimes contradictory, interpretations and meanings are incorporated in its use. Underlying much of the approaches of global North and traditionally 'Western' powers (including that of Australia) is the aim of containing China. Most recently, even NATO identified the Indo-Pacific as of strategic concern to Euro-Atlantic security and designated China as a 'systemic challenge' (NATO, 2022).

Since Abe's 2007 address, several countries and regional organisations have released Indo-Pacific strategies or have, at the very least, included the region as a core strategic concern in strategy and policy documents. The focus of this special issue of *Strategic Review* is on the way in which the Western Indian Ocean, encompassing Africa's eastern littoral states and Indian Ocean island states, is perceived in these strategies and policies.

In this article, we explore the evolution of the Indo-Pacific as a concept and construct and reflect on some of the elements at play in the current evolution of this area as a focus point of geopolitical attention. This serves as a backdrop to the analysis presented in the articles in this issue of the way in which the Western Indo-Pacific (the eastern seaboard of Africa and the Indian Ocean island states) is perceived and the extent to which it is incorporated in the Indo-Pacific strategies and policy documents of a range of actors in the Indo-Pacific. The first section provides a very brief historical overview of the evolution of the concept. In section 2 we situate the Indo-Pacific

within the Regional Security Complex (RSC) theory as developed by Buzan (1991) and Buzan, Waever and de Wilde (1998). RSC theory is selected as it allows for an analysis of (attempts at) regionalisation in contested geographical areas by providing conceptual tools such as relations of amity and enmity and for studying regionalisation as either a bottom-up or top-down process and the ways in which (and extent of) issues are securitised. RSC theory is focused on the question, ‘Why does this type of territorial subsystem come into being?’ (Buzan et al., 1998:9)¹. This is followed, in section 3, by a consideration of the multiplicity of contemporary views of the Indo-Pacific – ‘What is the Indo-Pacific/where is the Indo-Pacific in geographical terms?’ We pay attention to the mental maps underlying regional conceptions and to the political geography informing the construction of regions. We conclude with a number of comments on studying the Indo-Pacific as a region.

2. The evolution of the Indo-Pacific as concept and construct

Overviews of the evolution of the discourse on the Indo-Pacific tend to begin with the Abe speech in India, and trace the discourse in relation to what is considered the major players in the region, viz. the US, Japan, India, and Australia, i.e. the Quad, and, to some extent, also the UK in terms of AUKUS and France as the ‘other’ major power in the region (Grare, 2020). This discourse often points to the role of China and the fact that the Indo-Pacific as a concept is largely used by these actors as a way of staking a claim, containing China, and promoting their own interests. However, the contemporary story of the Indo-Pacific as a geopolitical construct dates back a century, and tracing the discursive history shows clearly that a simplistic assumption that the Indo-Pacific is a construct reflecting the power and interests of the global North and therefore that its use per definition indicates a proNorthern or pro-Western stance is actually a much more complex and nuanced issue. Neither is the Indo-Pacific necessarily seen by all actors, especially those in the region, as merely a ‘security space’,

¹ It is interesting to note that most of the literature, over many decades, on regions, regionalisation and regionalism is focused on *territory*, implying ‘land’ – a kind of terra-centric approach. As will be discussed in section 3, the early 21st century has seen an increasing focus on the maritime domain, and for the purpose of this article, we conceive of ‘territory’ as including oceanic space/s, a conception that is also acknowledged, e.g. in the UNCLOS use of the concept ‘a state’s territorial sea’. See https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/part2.htm

as, for example explained by RUSI². The work of Nag and Hatta (see below), and African perspectives (see Sooklal et al, 2019) paint a different picture of this region. They see it not so much as a securitised space³, but rather as a historical construct of the Global South that is also linked to national development agendas.

The concept ‘Indo-Pacific’ was first used in the 1920s by the German geographer, historian, and geostrategist of the Third Reich, Karl Haushofer in his work on ‘Indopazifischen Raum’. Li (2021) provides an in-depth discussion of the intellectual origins of the concept ‘Indo-Pacific’ in Haushofer’s work⁴ and points to the fact that Haushofer first and foremost developed his spatial theory as a call for anticolonial politics to remake the international order of his time (Li, 2021:830). For Haushofer, China and India were at the heart of his vision of an Indo-Pacific anti-colonial region that would withstand Euro-American imperialism, and crucially, the United States was not part of this vision. One is reminded of Robert Cox’s famous dictum, ‘theory is always for someone and for some purpose’ (Cox 1981:128), as Haushofer was, at the time, struggling to ‘extricate Germany from its geopolitical predicament’ of being landlocked and the impediments to commerce inherent in this situation (Li 2021, 821; 810). The very birth of the concept, therefore, is cloaked in anti-colonial rhetoric.

Haushofer’s work did not attract much attention outside of Germany, and it is doubtful that his ideas found much currency in what he defined as the Indo-Pacific. Yet, when the idea of the Indo-Pacific as a region next surfaces, it is in the 1940 book, *India and the Pacific World*, by the Indian historian, Kalidas Nag, discussed in a newspaper article by Raghavan (2019) in India. Nag deals with the ‘two seas’ as ‘largely [a] cultural and civilizational entity’ (Raghavan 2019)⁵.

Nag’s take on the Indo-Pacific is followed by an article penned by Indonesia’s first post-independence vice president, Mohammad Hatta, in 1953 in *Foreign Affairs*, ‘Indonesia’s Foreign Policy’, in which he emphasised the importance of social justice and prosperity and developed a framework for cooperation across the Indo-Pacific.

2 The Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) has a research project, ‘Russia Navigating the Indo-Pacific’ and refers specifically to the ‘Indo-Pacific security concept’ – see <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/projects/russia-navigating-indo-pacific>

3 African perspectives on the Indo-Pacific and Western Indian Ocean are, however, not covered in this issue.

4 Doyle and Rumley’s 2019 book, *The Rise and Return of the Indo-Pacific* also covers Haushofer’s work, as well as a number of other thinkers representing both schools of thought (an anti- and post-colonial approach, as well as a colonialist/contemporary Western approach; see pp28-44).

5 India’s contemporary conception of and approach to the Indo-Pacific is discussed in this issue.

Hatta articulated the idea of ‘steering between two reefs’, referring to the challenge for Indonesia of navigating its foreign policy between the two Cold War power blocs, and he subsequently played a crucial role in the establishment of the Non-Aligned Movement in Bandung in 1955⁶. At this point, the ‘Indo-Pacific’ was still largely an idea, rather than a construct, and post-independence regionalisation was focused on the Indian and Pacific regions as territorially/land-based, with relatively little attention to the two oceans as inherent and integral parts of the regions under construction.

The Pacific saw the evolution of ASEAN; in the Indian Ocean, encouraged by Mandela during a visit to India in 1995, the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) was founded in 1997. Focused on countries around the rim of the Indian Ocean, it includes four important ASEAN countries, viz., Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand, thereby implicitly recognising the ‘confluence of two seas’ a decade before Abe’s speech. ASEAN has adopted an Indo-Pacific outlook (ASEAN, 2019), and IORA is in the process of developing a vision. For ASEAN, its Outlook document clearly states that a key element of its approach to the Indo-Pacific is a ‘region of dialogue and cooperation instead of rivalry’ – again pointing to rather different perceptions of and approaches to what is meant by the Indo-Pacific as a region in most of the strategies, some of which are discussed in the articles in this issue. Given IORA’s focus on ‘strengthening regional cooperation and sustainable development within the Indian Ocean region’ (IORA, undated), it is expected that its Indo-Pacific vision⁷ will to a large extent mirror the approach of ASEAN, though perhaps with a clearer emphasis on the inclusion of the Western Indian Ocean as inherently a part of the Indo-Pacific.

3. The Indo-Pacific as a regional security complex

Traditionally, ‘regions’ have been territory-based, with an emphasis on contiguity and geographical proximity, with theorising and scholarship largely focused on ‘land’. Oceans, in the words of the historian John Mack, served ‘either as backdrop to the

6 Indonesia’s contemporary conception of and approach to the Indo-Pacific is closely aligned to that of ASEAN and it played a leading role in the development of the ASEAN Outlook (see Anwar, 2020; Yoshimatsu (2022)).

7 Whereas the US, UK, India and the EU and other actors refer to the Indo-Pacific in terms of or in the context of a ‘strategy’ (with its connotations of a security approach), ASEAN’s reference to an ‘Outlook’ and IORA’s use of the word ‘vision’ implies a very different approach, based in a more developmentalist and less confrontational conception of the evolving region.

stage on which the real action is seen to take place [i.e. land] or simply as means of connection...’ (Mack 2011:74). Contiguity in terms of land borders remained a core dimension of regional/regionalisation studies. Katzenstein, in his 2015 book, *World Regions*, discusses the evolution of large regions in the context of globalisation: contiguity in a sense loses its importance as a characterisation of a region. But this aspect – ‘land’ contiguity – could also be seen differently; not as no longer important, but rather that the oceans as such become the determinant of contiguity, as oceans become the new frontiers of exploration and exploitation in the quest for economic development. Oceans are no longer only, in Mack’s terms (2011), ‘backdrops’ or ‘means of connection’, but become ‘territory’ and objects of possession and ownership as sites of economic activity. The ocean economy, also known as the blue economy, is now a central focus of the economic development strategies of most littoral states (UNRIC, 2022). The importance of ownership is captured in the debates over the governance (and ownership issues) of ‘the area’ (see UNCLOS 1994, article 1), and disputes around maritime borders have intensified, especially in light of the discovery of liquid natural gas (LNG). The disputes between Kenya and Somalia (Walker and Gaas 2021), Israel and Lebanon (Marsi 2022), and Greece and Turkey (Nicolaou 2022) provide clear examples of the growing importance of ocean spaces to national governments.

Even a cursory glance through the burgeoning literature on the Indo-Pacific indicates that the dominant themes in the (re)emergence of this region are related to geostrategic concerns, national interests, issues of militarisation and competition – in short, classic or traditional security conceptualisations, and not only of the global North but also of states such as China (in this volume) and Russia (Denisov et al. 2021). The definition by Buzan et al. (1998:12) of a security complex as a ‘set of states whose major security perceptions and problems are so interlinked that their national security concerns cannot reasonably be analyzed or resolved apart from one another’ and the core assumption that ‘the formative dynamics and structure are generated by the states in that complex’ fit the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific, quite apart from who attempts to co-opt the ‘name’ (i.e., Indo-Pacific).

The Indo-Pacific as a geographical and now increasingly political/politicised region is one that does not easily fit into traditional conceptions of regionalism and regionalisation or ‘new regionalism’ (the latter being prevalent in the study of regions in the post-Cold War era), that either explicitly or implicitly assume a collective will towards regionalisation as enunciated in the work of Deutsch et al. (1957) and Adler and Barnett (1998). Core to these earlier works was a sense of the importance of cooperation

towards achieving the overarching goal of peaceful coexistence – expectations of durable peace, to paraphrase Deutsch. The implicit and explicit element of (Chinese) containment in many contemporary Indo-Pacific strategies calls for a different kind of analytical approach to the evolving Indo-Pacific. In this sense, Buzan's work on regional security complexes seems more apt as an analytical tool for understanding developments and trends in specific geographic regions, particularly in terms of the importance that he attaches to the nature of relations in such a region – amity/enmity/indifference (1991:192). Clearly, the Indo-Pacific strategies of India, the US, and others are tilted towards a perception of relations characterised by enmity, at least as far as China is concerned, with attempts at fostering amity amongst the Quad.

Another element of Buzan's theory on regional security complexes, and one that is well illustrated in the evolution of and adoption of the concept 'Indo-Pacific' is his point that recognition of a complex is not a necessary condition of its existence but that it 'may well influence the policies of the actors involved by making them more conscious of the larger relational context underlying their specific policy problems' (1991:192). The growing interest in and policy attention directed at the region clearly shows this 'consciousness' of the 'larger relational context', explaining China's acceptance of the concept (however reluctantly) and even that of Russia (see Denisov et al., 2021). The Indo-Pacific, in Buzan's terms, is clearly a 'higher-level' security complex (1991:195), given the deep involvement of major and superpowers in this region and the complex security interdependencies inherent in the politics and situation in this region. Less clear is the delineation of this region – where are its boundaries? – an aspect discussed in the following section.

Another reason for situating the Indo-Pacific as an evolving region within RSC theory is that the region increasingly reflects a classical security dilemma: it is being militarised as part of the responses of both the US and China to what they perceive as a threat to their own security and interests. In the case of China, one can point to its conduct in the South China Sea, including building artificial islands and focusing on the enlargement and modernisation of its navy, as well as its recent security pact concluded with the Solomon Islands. On the part of the US, the perception of a need to respond to a serious security threat is evident in the AUKUS agreement to provide Australia with nuclear submarines, as well as other aspects of the Quad agreement (see Ristanto, 2022). As tensions have built up between the US and its allies, on the one hand, and China, on the other over the past decade, militarisation has increased (see Wuthnow, 2019), and not only in the Pacific/Eastern Indo-Pacific but also in the

Indian Ocean. Initially under the guise of anti-piracy operations, several great powers now have military bases in Djibouti, with clearly no intent to dismantle these following the lapse of the UN Security Council's counter-piracy resolution (Resolution 2608) in March 2022 (Walker and Reva 2022; Alden and Schoeman 2022). The fact is that threat perceptions have resulted in a security dilemma and, in turn, in the growing militarisation of the Indo-Pacific, with the (security) interests of the region's major players overlaying alternative conceptions of the region in a top-down construction of the region in what Buzan et al. (1998:198) refer to as taking place in the context of politico-military issues. The ASEAN Outlook, the focus of IORA, and the work of, for instance, Sooklal et al. (2019), are far removed from the region-construction rationale of the great powers. These varied perspectives on and readings of the Indo-Pacific space are discussed in somewhat more detail in the following section.

4. A multiplicity of geographic views – and the politics of geography

Buzan points out that 'it can be difficult to locate the boundaries of security complexes whose existence is not in doubt' (1991:198). In the case of the evolving Indo-Pacific, there are multiple geographic interpretations of where this region starts and ends, as demonstrated by the volume's contributions on different state perspectives towards the Western Indo-Pacific.

Regarding the US, there are different accounts of its geographic interpretations, yet overall, as is the case for Australia, the Indo-Pacific includes the former Asia-Pacific and extends to the Indian Ocean to specifically include India (Wu 2021:4). As the China article in this volume notes, the 'Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States' of February 2022 does not mention Africa at all and instead focuses on partnerships with the Quad and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), while clearly identifying India as a major actor in this region. In May 2022, the US, together with several partners, announced the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), with all the beneficiary states in the Pacific, and not a single Indian-Ocean state as part of the Framework (see Singh, 2022). Yet interestingly, barely three months later, in August 2022, in its newly released 'US Strategy Toward Sub-Saharan Africa', mention is made of Africa in relation to the Indo-Pacific, with a commitment to integrate the continent into forums on the Indo-Pacific (2022:12) – a clear indication of changes underway in the region and the larger global context (following section).

India and Japan view the region as including the western-most part of the Indo-

Pacific, that is, Africa, in their conceptions. In fact, it was at the 2016 Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) that Japan's 'free and open Indo-Pacific' (FOIP) strategic vision was introduced, which suggests Africa's significance in it (Koga 2020:49). However, Japan was already speaking of a 'Confluence of Two Seas' in 2007 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan 2007).

Outside of the Quad, the European Union (EU) sees the region stretching from the East Coast of Africa to the Pacific islands, but the focus still remains on the major economies situated in this space, viz., China, India and Japan (Delegation of the European Union to the Philippines 2022; see also article on the EU in this volume). As has been pointed out earlier, ASEAN has since 2019 taken the view that the Asia-Pacific and Indian Oceans are connected, although a reading of the ASEAN Outlook, specifically the first few articles in Section 1 of the document, point to the extent to which the boundaries of this region reflect a work in progress. Reference is constantly made to 'region' and 'regions', encompassing 'South East Asia and its surrounding *regions* (emphasis added), and great emphasis is placed on the Organisation's view of the central role that ASEAN should have in the evolving regional architecture. For Russia, which is a member of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), there is little evidence that the Western Indian Ocean features in its approach to the Indo-Pacific. Denisov et al. (2021) also discuss in detail the extent to which Russia perceives the Indo-Pacific through the lens of Eurasia and considers the Indo-Pacific as, in a way, conducive to its own creation of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), founded in the wake of the 2007/8 global financial crisis, and as a manifestation of a Greater Eurasia. The western Indian Ocean does not feature in this conception.

It is precisely because there is no agreement over what the current Indo-Pacific means – and its lack of institutional presence to date (Beeson 2018; He and Feng 2020) – that these differing spatial interpretations are significant. These interpretations create the structure of understanding for what could potentially represent this greater region.

Geography is not simply the physical contours that define a map; it is also the perceptions, assumptions, and ideas that determine what gets included and what gets left off, and by default, this draws a divisive line between the self and others, such as who is deemed a partner or competitor. Mapping therefore involves a mental landscape, what Metcalfe (2019:83) refers to as 'mental maps'. For example, China's initial refusal to accept the Indo-Pacific was due to the view that many of the strategies that encapsulated the 'buzzword' countered its own mapping (promoted by its BRI), which overlays the same geographic region.

The Indo-Pacific as a concept has yet to move from being largely associated with defence as appears in some strategies, such as that of the United Kingdom with its reference to a ‘tilt’ towards the Indo-Pacific (Barry et al. 2022), to other areas of cooperation, as encapsulated in the ASEAN outlook. Tangible commitments to areas such as development which would add to the Indo-Pacific’s credibility, are still few and far between. Nevertheless, the concept’s impact is being felt at the level of discourse about how the world is structured and who states consider to be their ‘natural’ partners. Ringmar’s (2012) work on different historical world systems suggests that states interpret the world through discourse, which are like scripts that they perform on the global stage. For example, the US seems to view the Indo-Pacific as a primary theatre of rivalry with revisionist powers (Medcalf 2019: 82). They – and others who ‘announce’ their strategies and policies – make use of what Murphy (2013: 133) refers to as grand regional narratives that are not simply facts, but create a structure or frame to help make sense of events and to justify or rationalise these approaches and policy actions. Such narratives are often based on the construction of mental maps – in a way, reading physical geography through the lens of a state’s own identity, including interests, culture, history, and collective norms.

Medcalf (2019:83) explains mental maps as determining ‘what is on the map, what is off the map, and why’ and ‘what gets talked about, what gets done, and what gets forgotten’. Medcalf (2019:85) also refers to the power narratives of states, meaning the ‘big powers’ in the Indo-Pacific, and the fact that their mental maps and narratives are basically shaping this region. The mental maps and narratives of lesser and smaller powers, in this instance also comprising and determining the way in which they perceive the evolving Indo-Pacific, are discounted.

From an IR constructivist’s perspective, mental maps reflect a state or region’s identity, where behaviour is shaped by elite beliefs, collective norms, and social identities (Walt 1998:38). Some of the factors that affect a nation’s view of the world and its boundaries include how it perceives itself, its position in relation to others, and the broad scope of interests.

How a state views itself has a lot to do with cultural inheritance as well as political culture, that is a ‘collective programming of the mind’ where certain values and societal norms inform politics in a particular space and time (Almond and Verba, 1963: 90). In other words, states have their own ‘off-the-shelf’ adaptive responses or templates when responding to unknown events (Hudson 1999:768). An instance is the work mentioned by Ringmar where different world systems such as the Westphalian, Sino-centric, and

Tokugawa systems had their own features and interpretations of the world that filtered their interactions. Countless studies have also been done on the influence of certain cultural aspects on, for example, Chinese political and social life that include social hierarchy, collective emphasis, and the saving of face, or *mianzi* (Hsü 1984: 69; Murthy 2002). Culture, values, and norms thus have an impact on identity.

A second aspect in relation to perceptions of the external environment is the impact of geography on identity. The island status of the UK has for example affected its attitude towards its European neighbours over the course of many centuries, as threats of national security were historically directed from these states (Young 1987: 394). Its island status has become part of its political culture, and a strong national security element seems to remain in its 2021 Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development, and Foreign Policy (HM Government 2021). Importantly, states are also able to supersede geography, as technological innovation has changed the game for nations without natural endowments, such as Singapore and South Korea (Young 1987:395). Geography appears to be both an obstacle and an opportunity, as Weiner (2016) aptly states: ‘our environment seeps inside us. We internalize our surroundings so that, eventually, the line between out there and in here dissolves entirely’.

Indeed, the role of climate change, particularly its impact on island states, could again affect identities further. This reflects the fact that state identities are not as stable as they seem; they are always being reconstituted, but, as Flockhart (2012:85) points out, the use of strategic narratives and discourse can make such changes in strategy and approach seem almost natural and purposeful.

The third factor that impacts on how boundaries are conceptualised is a state’s interests, which also have the ability to alter its positions and strategies. It is true that interests serve as a primary driver for the multiple strategies directed towards and against the idea of an Indo-Pacific, often defined in terms of security interests. Buzan (1991:197) acknowledges the role of culture in the ‘shape and structure’ of a regional security complex but that ‘patterns of security perception [...] are the principal defining factor’. Indeed, a state’s selection of a particular map helps to simplify and make sense of a complex reality, which in turn reflects their interests (Medcalf 2019:84). Interests are also not identical among actors; their choices are conditioned by particular preferences and behaviour, and in respect to other actors, which suggests that the self is understood in relation to the ‘other’ (Hopf 1998:175). In this way entire regions are almost entirely socially constructed through recognition, identification, and membership (Beeson 2018:85).

What this reflects is that apart from these primordial aspects (such as cultural, historical, emotional, and physical ties), interests are less stable and are prone to shifting. Hence, geographic notions are not static, as political geography changes along with political circumstances (Tyler 2019). Similarly to changes in aspects like climate or geopolitics, political cultures are also susceptible to change, only the motivation for change – such as survival, political, or economic – needs to be greater than the status quo. This is true of the Indo-Pacific which not long ago signified a geographic region based on the notion of an ecosystem that was of interest only to marine biologists (Beeson 2018:86). Yet with the promotion of the concept by the Quad members, initially Japan and Australia and now championed by the US, it has become, in essence, a response to global power shifts.

Furthermore, primordial aspects can also be instrumentalised to serve interests (Zhao 2004:5). The various strategies and outlooks that include the Indian and Pacific oceans reflect particular interests as well as the use of primordial traits or grand narratives. ASEAN as a region has historically served as a trade network within and outside of its immediate region, and due to this, it is the product of a diffusion of culture and even architecture across the states (Kaur and Isa 2020). Both its historical role and physical position between two oceans, has influenced ASEAN's view as the centre of the Indo-Pacific and as a natural leader in its security and economic architecture (ASEAN 2019). Likewise, when China's BRI was first launched, speeches (Xi 2014) would frequently evoke historical ties and friendship along the ancient Silk Road to appease concerns about its rise and intentions.

5. Conclusion

This article has served as a conceptual introduction to external perceptions of the evolving construct of the 'Indo-Pacific', setting the context for the articles that follow and discuss perceptions of Africa's role and position in the Indo-Pacific. It outlined the historical evolution of the Indo-Pacific concept, which, contrary to the current pro-North slant, is deeply rooted in ideas of anti-colonial politics, social justice, developmentalism, and cooperation.

The RSC theory has been identified as a useful framework for understanding the Indo-Pacific, though it is conceded that the theory (and most other theories on regionalisation) needs to be further developed in order to account for the move away from terra-centric approaches and definitions of regions to account for what the EU

article in this issue calls ‘maritime regions’ – spaces and places that go beyond serving only as connecting channels between land areas. RSC also aptly explains how security problems and concerns are intimately tied to others and is therefore relational. These complex relations and calculations are further explored in the subsequent articles that address Australia, China, the EU, and India. Aspects of the approaches and perceptions of ASEAN, the US, and Russia were briefly covered as well.

Finally, this essay explored the political geography of the Indo-Pacific, where the security complex is clearly delineated by selected states, yet the actual physical boundaries are demonstrably open to interpretation. The factors identified that impact each state’s geographic view (and thereby approach) towards this maritime region include how a state perceives itself, how that state views its position in the world, and finally, how a state makes sense of (and projects) its changing interests, always informed by security, however defined.

Building on the contributions to this volume, the following issues and questions are of importance in deepening our understanding of this concept and geographic region, as well as perceptions of Africa’s role in it.

Ultimately, what makes the Indo-Pacific a mega- or maritime region? For the moment, connectivity has a lot to do with the shift of power in the region. It is formulated to represent cooperation and shared or perceived security concerns amongst a handful of dispersed states which, unlike regional-based groupings, omits many states geographically situated in this space, such as African large ocean states⁸ like Mauritius. Shared interpretation has the potential to override factual topography as reflected by the US’ current view of the region as, in essence, the Asia-Pacific with the addition of India (Javaid 2021). The issue is that ‘a sense of shared geography or “regionalism” can shape international cooperation and institutions’ and this effectively privileges some nations and diminishes others (Medcalf 2019: 83). This then has implications for partners, such as African littoral states, who are unevenly accounted for (or hardly at all) in many current conceptions.

Perhaps those qualitatively excluded from current Indo-Pacific strategies, reflecting very particular mental maps of the political geography of the region, are not seeking to be part of what are considered narrow conceptualisations. Indeed, some African and Southeast Asian states are engaging in their own interpretation of this geographic

8 The conventional nomenclature of ‘small island states’/ ‘small island development states (SIDS)’ is slowly making way for a new classification, viz. ‘large ocean states’. See Hume et al. (2021).

space, such as their parallel support for China's BRI (ASEAN is a good example) and the potential for an IORA vision towards the Indo-Pacific, which could represent some African state positions. Likewise, some South African policymakers have indicated that the concept is in essence a construct of the South, and there is therefore no need to 're-engage' something that is already part of it (Sooklal et al., 2019). For the moment there are also real impediments to Africa's engagement in the Indo-Pacific. There also appears to be a growing African-based epistemic community thinking toward the issue than what is publicly visible at the policy level⁹ (Wu and Schoeman 2022), although these ideas have not yet become part of the bigger, largely US- and Quad-driven discourse and debate on the Indo-Pacific.

The contested views of the Indo-Pacific are part of larger debates and struggles regarding the changing world order and the ideas and values underpinning and governing it. This was clear at the Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2022, where the US and China shared markedly different views towards the global stage: the former emphasised its Indo-Pacific view, while China stressed that it could not be isolated in the region (Hass 2022). A few days later the 2022 BRICS Summit was hosted by China, and shortly after that, the G7 Summit. The views displayed toward global affairs on each stage were representative of the diversity of mental maps that exist and the manner in which global politics is deeply contested with the Indo-Pacific taking center stage alongside the Russia-Ukraine war. The BRICS prides itself as a platform for alternative views of global affairs, which is attractive for states that feel marginalised and were not part of building the current global order, as pointed out by the India article in this issue. Whether a specific BRICS approach or strategy towards the Indo-Pacific will evolve is not at all clear: the Indian and Chinese mental maps are simply too different at this stage.

The final question is to what extent Africa will exercise 'actorness' in deciding to what length, and with what objective, it belongs to the evolving Indo-Pacific?

It is envisaged that this volume will serve as a reference toward building and understanding the potential for African conceptions and strategies toward the increasingly important maritime regions.

9 See for example the compilation of African country perspectives, compiled by the Observer Research Foundation (ORF) based in New Delhi: https://www.orfonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/ORF_Monograph_Reflections-on-the-Indo-Pacific-Perspectives-from-Afric.pdf

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