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## Perspectives on Africa's Position and Role in the Evolving Indo-Pacific

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The past decade and a half, ever since former Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe's 'Confluence of the Two Oceans' speech in front of the Indian parliament in August 2007, has seen the rapid evolution of the concept 'Indo-Pacific', a clear shift from what had been, since the 1990s, an emphasis on the 'Asia Pacific'. From a global North perspective, the turn to the Indo-Pacific is a recognition of the growing importance of the Indo-Pacific in the global economy, as well as a concerted effort to address, if not counter, the rise of China and its growing global influence. Recently, a spate of countries and regional organisations have released Indo-Pacific strategies or policies, a clear indication of their awareness of the importance of this geographical area in the global political and economic terrains.

Observing, researching, and teaching this evolution of what is, at first glance, a new concept in geopolitics and geostrategy from an African perspective brought to our attention the need to assess the way in which Africa, at the very least coastal East and Southern Africa as well as island states, are situated and perceived in these approaches and strategies. Africa, after all, forms the Western 'outpost' of the Indo-Pacific, at least from a purely geographical perspective, and the Suez Canal and the Strait of Bab el-Mandeb are two of the best known maritime 'chokepoints', being of huge importance in transporting global cargo, especially oil and gas, between the Indo-Pacific and the Mediterranean (and, by extension, the 'greater' West). Furthermore, piracy off the Horn of Africa has garnered international attention and global cooperation in an effort to fight this scourge, whilst the growing importance of natural gas in the sea off Northern Mozambique to Europe, and the vulnerability of the Mozambique channel as a potential choke point in the context of sea-borne insurgency, have started to draw attention to Africa's position and role in the Indo-Pacific's Western Indian Ocean region. Entangled in the mix is the presence, implicitly or explicitly, of the BRICS formation, with China, India, and South Africa integral to the Indo-Pacific.

In early 2021, a small group of researchers in the Department of Political Sciences at the University of Pretoria began studying the evolving Indo-Pacific and the way in

which actors external to Africa conceive of Africa's position and role in the region. They convened two roundtable discussions on this topic in November 2021 and March 2022, also involving researchers and scholars from India, Indonesia, Australia, the EU, and the UK, embassy staff from some of the countries in the Indo-Pacific region, and South African maritime and foreign policy experts. This special issue of the *Strategic Review for Southern Africa* contains a number of articles interrogating the way in which the Indo-Pacific is conceived in the growing number of strategies and approaches to the region, with a focus on the way in which Africa is situated or perceived (if at all) in these public documents. Regrettably it is not possible to provide a comprehensive set of such perspectives, given the large number of countries and organisations focusing increasingly on the importance of the Indo-Pacific. What is offered in this issue is a small number of specialised analyses of the strategies of India, the EU, and China, representing some of the most important actors in this evolving ocean region.

This issue opens with an article by Schoeman and Wu, exploring the Indo-Pacific as a regional security complex. Their analysis includes references to the approaches and strategies of Indonesia, ASEAN, the US, and Russia, and also provides a brief historical overview of the concept 'Indo-Pacific', pointing out that it is not, as often dealt with in contemporary literature, a 'new' construct but one with a history going back more than a century, and one that has, apart from a hard military and political security content, also a strong developmental foundation, as captured in the rationale for the establishment of the Indian Ocean Rim Association in 1997. The article also explores the role of political geography in the Indo-Pacific as the physical boundaries of this mega-region remain open to interpretation.

Bhatia's article on India's Indo-Pacific perspective focuses in particular on the Western Indo-Pacific. Although India's strategy encompasses the whole of the Indo-Pacific, Bhatia makes it clear that there is, for India, a distinction between the 'Indo' and 'Pacific' sub-regions, making for a kind of segmented approach to the macro-region. Yet, in sharp contrast to several other Indo-Pacific strategies, India views Eastern and Southern Africa, including Africa's Indian Ocean island states, as an integral part of its strategy and India-Africa relations as crucial to India's role as a regional power. Although India's focus in the eastern Indo-Pacific is very much determined by China's conduct in that region, Bhatia concedes that India's western Indo-Pacific approach is also entangled in its competition with China for influence in the region.

In their article, Mattheis and Diaz provide an analysis of the strategies and

approaches of the EU, both as an organisation and of some of its leading members in the maritime domain, viz., France, Germany, and the Netherlands, to the evolving Indo-Pacific. What their article illustrates is the growing geopolitical and strategic importance attached to this region as, strictly speaking, these are actors external to the Indo-Pacific. France presents an interesting exception because the island of Reunion is considered a ‘department’ of France, the French have retained a role in the Indian Ocean and have ensured a measure of acceptance and permanence as an ‘Indian Ocean actor’, confirmed by its admittance as a permanent member of IORA in 2020. Nevertheless, as the authors point out, there is considerable divergence in the approaches and strategies of the EU and individual EU states with respect to Africa and these approaches concede little agency to African actors.

In rather stark contrast to the above articles, Wu and Alden’s analysis of China’s ‘alternate gaze’ towards the Indo-Pacific emphasises the extent to which the Quad has been appropriating the construct ‘Indo-Pacific’ as a way of containing (or attempting to contain) the rise of China – populating or conceptualizing the construct in such a way that it excludes China and serves to bolster Quad power and influence in this region. Wu and Alden do point out though, that the contours and future of the construct are still fluid and left open for interpretation and that China, after its initial heavy opposition to the use of and reference to the ‘Indo-Pacific’, seems to have started to accept it in some ways. What does make China different from the other actors covered in the articles in this issue is the fact that Africa is very much a part of China’s conception of the Western Indo-Pacific region in geographical terms with a measure of agency or at the very least recognition granted to Africa within China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), including its maritime dimension, as well as in other forums in which China interacts with the continent, such as Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC).

The articles in this journal explicitly or implicitly critique or emphasise the fact that no matter how important the Indo-Pacific has become in geopolitics and strategy, Africa as constituting the Western Indo-Pacific remains rather on the margins of the debates, conversations, policies, approaches, and strategies of the big powers involved in the evolution of this region. The continent, or its eastern and south-eastern coastline and ocean states, may be mentioned in these concepts of this vast ocean region, but even then there is little evidence of it being perceived as an important player – it remains a part of the region talked about, rather than talked to. The question about Africa’s position and role in the Indo-Pacific does not only speak to the approach and strategies of actors external to the continent. Africa and its eastern coastal and Indian



Ocean island states, need to exercise actorly qualities. The extent to which this is the case will be the focus of a follow-up special issue of this journal.

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# 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 second section provides a very brief historical overview of the evolution of the concept. In section 3 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)<sup>1</sup>. This is followed, in section 4, 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’,

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<sup>1</sup> 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](https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/part2.htm)

as, for example explained by RUSI<sup>2</sup>. 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 space<sup>3</sup>, 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 work<sup>4</sup> 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)<sup>5</sup>.

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.

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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 1955<sup>6</sup>. 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 vision<sup>7</sup> 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

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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 states<sup>8</sup> 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

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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 level<sup>9</sup> (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.

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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-Africa.pdf](https://www.orfonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/ORF_Monograph_Reflections-on-the-Indo-Pacific-Perspectives-from-Africa.pdf)

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# Perceptions of Africa's Role in the Western Indo-Pacific: An Indian Perspective

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## 1. Introduction

For over a decade the Indo-Pacific has emerged as a new construct – an intellectual device – to interpret and comprehend the changing geopolitical dynamics in Asia and beyond. It is aptly viewed as a strategy and policy by powers within this region and outside, which assists them in identifying and safeguarding their national interests in an evolving situation. Among the diverse players there is a clear division between those states such as the Quad Powers (the US, India, Japan, and Australia) that support the concept and those states such as China and Russia that oppose it. This gives the ongoing debate on the Indo-Pacific clear ideological and political colour. Is this discussion then only about China's rise and behaviour and how it needs to be addressed, or does it relate to the larger issue of an inclusive, equitable, and multipolar order that promotes peace, security, and prosperity in all states covered by this concept, including those in Africa?

The subsidiary but vital question then is: what are the geographical contours and boundaries of the Indo-Pacific, which is more a geopolitical concept than a geographical region? Opinions among the governments concerned and academics vary on this matter, but, after years of discussions and deliberations, a viable consensus seems to have emerged that a wider definition rather than a narrower one is preferable to most advocates of the concept.

This chapter aims to examine the questions framed above and related issues from the perspective of India. In doing so it keeps in view the opinions and policy approaches of its Quad partners, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the



European Union (EU), and other key stakeholders in the Western Indo-Pacific (WIP), which comprises the eastern and southern coastal states of Africa and the island nations in the Indian Ocean region, west and south of India. In the end, it offers a set of considered policy suggestions that could enhance the role of WIP states in shaping the evolution of the Indo-Pacific, thereby deepening the multifaceted linkages between Asia and Africa and the sub-region connecting them.

## 2. Indo-Pacific, differing definitions

Considering that proponents of the Indo-Pacific have offered such differing definitions in the past, it is surprising that the phrase has acquired much clarity and salience, especially during the current tenure of President Joe Biden. This is evident particularly from the conclusions of the four summits of the Quad powers held between March 2021 and May 2022.

Does the word ‘Indo’ in the ‘Indo-Pacific’ stand for the Indian Ocean or India? The US government initially accepted the western boundary of the Indian Ocean as defining the Indo-Pacific, but later settled on India as the outer limit. The act of renaming the US Pacific Command as the Indo-Pacific Command closed the matter for Washington. Australia began by first excluding the South Pacific from the scope of the Indo-Pacific, but later reversed itself and adopted the US definition.

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who was the first to speak about ‘the convergence of Two Oceans’ (the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean), confined himself to the notion of a ‘broader Asia.’ Subsequently, Japan and the US together put forward the notion of a ‘free and open Indo-Pacific.’ Yet Tokyo remained open to including the African littorals in the Indo-Pacific in some form, given its pioneering role in forging relations with Africa through its innovative summit diplomacy that began well before China, India, and other players joined the fray.

India (2022), on the other hand, has been consistent from the beginning in interpreting the Indo-Pacific as a region stretching from the shores of Africa to the shores of the Americas, or from Kilimanjaro to California<sup>1</sup>.

From among different definitions, Haruko (2020), a Japanese official and scholar, identified the maritime domain, India and Southeast Asia as “the three common

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1 In his address, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar defined the Indo-Pacific “as a region that extends from the Eastern shores of Africa to the Western shores of America.”

geographical components” of the Indo-Pacific and asserted convincingly: “Outside the core area, the Indo-Pacific has converged eastwards and diverged westwards in the course of the adjustments that the various countries have made in the geographical scope of the concept.” She explained:

In sum, the geographical contraction of “Indo-Pacific” by the United States was an active adjustment derived from an independent policy change towards China, and the geographical expansion by the others was a passive adjustment through their policy development or change in self-awareness influenced by the other players in the “Indo-Pacific”.

### 3. Key issues and perceptions

Until 2008, the US-China equation in what then went by the name of the ‘Asia-Pacific’ region was stable and cordial. The change gradually began to appear with the growing economic and military power of China, which led to its assertiveness and hunger for a bigger role that could only come at the expense of US dominance. This continued in the decade that followed. A new pattern of China’s aggressive actions in the South China and East China Seas, insistence on the validity of the 9-dash line, use of intimidation and coercion in dealing with other claimant states such as Vietnam and the Philippines, in the disputes with Japan, and its rejection of the verdict by the Permanent Court of Arbitration delivered in July 2016 (Jakhar 2021), all combined to create an increasingly tense and unstable environment.

It is against this complex backdrop that countries led by the US became more united, articulate, and active in advancing the view that member-states of the region needed to uphold international law, freedom of navigation and overflight, peaceful settlement of disputes, and the avoidance of coercion and force in their dealings with each other. This was all directed at China. However, these diplomatic endeavours, backed by the periodic US Navy Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOP), have had negligible effect (Larter 2020). The decades-old negotiations between China and ASEAN for an enforceable Code of Conduct remained stuck, producing nothing but disappointment and concern all around (Hoang 2020).

From 2017 onwards, US-China relations deteriorated further as the Trump Administration, after a brief honeymoon with Beijing, began implementing strong

economic measures against China. Driven by shared grievances against Beijing, the US, Japan, and Australia came closer together. So did India, despite its initial inclination to promote an inclusive Indo-Pacific. The first meeting of the Quad foreign ministers took place in September 2019. This was a significant pointer to growing geopolitical polarization. The onset of the Covid era accelerated this trend, given China's perceived role in giving birth to the pandemic. As the Biden tenure began in January 2021, the Quad solidarity increased markedly with India now even more clearly on board after having suffered a bloody border clash in the Galwan Valley (Ladakh) with the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) in June 2020. The Quad's advocacy of the Indo-Pacific, where peace, security, and congenial conditions for everyone's economic development would prevail, became strident. At the conclusion of their summit in Tokyo, the Quad leaders asserted that "the Quad is a force for good committed to bringing tangible benefits to the region," adding (The White House 2022):

In our first year of cooperation, we established the Quad's dedication to a positive and practical agenda; in our second year, we are committed to deliver on this promise, making the region more resilient for the 21st century.

China, backed by Russia, took a different position on the other side. They held the view that 'Asia-Pacific' remained the correct description of the region, rejected the Indo-Pacific as a term, and insisted that the Quad and other new formations reflected the Cold War mindset and an attempt by the US and its partners to contain China. For a while, Moscow seemed open to playing a role in the Indo-Pacific region, but its position became more closely aligned with that of Beijing, following the summit between President Xi Jinping and President Putin in February 2022. In the joint communique issued then, the two governments expressed serious concern over the formation of a trilateral strategic partnership between the US, the UK, and Australia (President of Russia 2022).

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the outbreak of the war turned the international spotlight on Europe and away from the Indo-Pacific – but only for a while. Russia's invasion raised the possibility of military action by China against Taiwan, in the South China Sea or elsewhere, which scholars feared could lead to escalated tensions and wider conflict. A new and serious flashpoint emerged in July 2022 when Nancy Pelosi, the speaker of the US House of Representatives, undertook a high-profile visit to Taiwan as part of her trip to the region. This visit was meant to convey the US



support for and solidarity with Taiwan. She insisted on sticking to her programme despite the Chinese threat of effective countermeasures and possibly the advice of the US administration to abandon the visit. President Biden let the cat out of the bag when, before the visit, he announced that the US military was not in favour of it. Although the visit took place without incident, it led China to order the most intrusive military exercises/drills and the closure of sea and air routes, amounting to a virtual blockade of the region surrounding Taiwan for a few days. The US military stayed out of the way. Mark Miley, chairman of the joint chief of staff, observed at a media briefing in Australia that the Chinese were “pushing the envelope” in terms of the international waters in the South China Sea. “We know,” he added, “that in the air and maritime domain their activity is much more assertive, much more aggressive, much more confrontational than it was say five years or 10 years or 15 years ago” (Tillett 2020).

International expert opinion was divided on whether the US or China came out as winners from the crisis created by the visit of the US Speaker. The US succeeded in arranging the high-profile visit despite Beijing’s warnings, while China undertook the most intrusive and elaborate naval drills and exercises in a long time. The region watched with alarm the marked escalation in tensions between them. Shyam Saran, former foreign secretary of India, aptly observed, “Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan is provocative and the angry reaction from China should have been expected.” Spelling out the implications of this episode for India, Saran pointed out that “China’s preoccupation with its eastern ocean flank of the Yellow Sea, the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea is good for India.” Like several other experts, he emphasized the need for New Delhi to focus on expanding India’s naval capabilities (Saran 2022).

In contrast to developments in the region east of India, as captured above, the key trends in the WIP region, west and south of India, presented a different picture.

First, the island states in the Indian Ocean and the eastern and southern littoral states of Africa were largely excluded from the debate on the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific. The South China Sea and Taiwan seemed far too distant to them, even though the issues at stake of freedom of navigation and overflight and the need for states to resolve disputes through peaceful means were relevant to them. Second, an overarching development in this region seemed to be the expanding economic, naval, and maritime footprint of China. This came along with the deepening of China’s economic linkages with the stakeholders in Africa under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road. Her active and extensive economic diplomacy impelled several other international partners of Africa, such as the US, India, Brazil, Turkey, and

Australia, to begin enhancing their endeavours for cooperation with Africa.

Finally, the increasing pace of the Chinese Navy to secure bases and other maritime facilities in places stretching from Djibouti to Gwadar (Pakistan) and Hambantota (Sri Lanka) to Sittwe (Myanmar) became a matter of deep concern to other powers. It was noticed that other nations like the US and France began deploying more naval assets to the region. The activism by the Indian Navy too increased considerably.

## 4. India's policy approach

An accurate understanding and appraisal of India's policy approach to the Indo-Pacific in general and the WIP in particular require a close look at the plethora of policy statements as well as actions by the Indian government since the Narendra Modi government began its innings in May 2014. The past eight years (2014-2022) saw the policy gain considerable clarity, especially after June 2020. Having stressed the need for an inclusive, cooperative, and consultative approach - its Plan A - New Delhi revealed the tendency to shift toward Plan B. This came following the summer of 2020 onwards, after China undertook serious border transgressions against India violating previous agreements and protocols.

Plan B involved a closer alignment with the US through the consolidation of the Quad as well as increased bilateral defense cooperation between the US and India and between Japan and India.

What has been the Plan A needs to be appreciated fully. Ideally, India stands for an inclusive, orderly, and multipolar region where all states follow international law, respect and cooperate with each other, and resolve their differences through dialogue and diplomacy. Security and development of all states, big or small, have been the key motto and guiding principles. This approach was first articulated in PM Modi's seminal speech on the concept of SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) (India 2015). This was further amplified in his address at the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2018 (India 2018) as well as his speech at the East Asia Summit in 2019 (India 2019). Presenting an overarching view in August 2022, External Affairs Minister Jaishankar stated (India 2022):

We envisage a free, open, inclusive, peaceful, and prosperous Indo-Pacific region, one which is built on a rules-based international order, sustainable and transparent

infrastructure investment, freedom of navigation and over-flight, unimpeded lawful commerce, mutual respect for sovereignty, peaceful resolution of disputes, as well as equality of all nations.

The common elements in these statements include a clear acceptance of the concept of the Indo-Pacific in its widest version that is, a region that is stretched from the eastern and southern coasts of Africa to the western shores of the US. At the same time, it was also implicit that India's increased activism in the region, spread from Myanmar to the South Pacific, would be tempered by the concentration of New Delhi's primary focus on the WIP. This calibrated approach is reflected in the work of three divisions in the Ministry of External Affairs: the Indo-Pacific division handles multilateral issues at the macro level that relate to the two oceans; the Americas division deals with the Quad, besides relations with North America; and the Indian Ocean division responsible for India's bilateral relations with Sri Lanka, Maldives, and four other states: Mauritius, the Seychelles, Madagascar, and the Comoros. In other words, India's traditional interest in the IOR has not been diluted or reduced just because it has stepped up its policy articulation, security cooperation, and diplomatic activities focused on its Act East policy, with sharply etched Indo-Pacific dimensions and a continuing emphasis on the centrality of ASEAN.

Seen from the Indian perspective, the two segments of the Indo-Pacific – western and eastern – do look qualitatively different. In the east, the central question is China's aggressive behaviour across the board. Further, the old issues such as Taiwan and North Korea are the legacies of World War II and the Cold War period, where the US and its allies, but not India, have been the primary actors. Besides ASEAN, the 10-member grouping enjoys a unique position and convening power, flowing from the elaborate institutional architecture it has been able to create in the past five decades. This makes it essential for India (and others) to take ASEAN along in managing the rising geopolitical tensions. Finally, a key characteristic of the region is the diversity of trade and economic groupings such as APEC, CPTPP, and RCEP. India is not a member of any of them. The US is a member of APEC but not of the other two groupings. In March 2022, a new economic grouping – the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) – has been established at the US initiative, which includes 14 countries: the four member-states of the Quad, seven member-states of ASEAN (thus excluding the other three, namely Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia), New Zealand, South Korea, and Fiji.

In contrast, the WIP offers a significantly different scene: no territorial disputes

in which China is a party, such as in the South China Sea; no Taiwan or the Korean Peninsula-like issues; no similar web of regional institutions as the ASEAN-driven architecture; and an accepted tendency by most stakeholders to treat West Asia as a separate entity. The only common phenomenon is China's expanding footprint, even in the WIP as well as on the African continent itself. This does involve the sharpening of the strategic contestation between the US and China and other western powers and, at a lower level, the ongoing competition between China and India for regional influence, both in the economic realm and the maritime security space. But this is nowhere near threatening an international conflict, unlike the serious situation in the east.

Indian policymakers are well aware of the unwillingness of the member states of WIP to be asked to choose a partner from among the various suitors such as the US, China, India, EU, France, and Germany. The region's preference is to seek assistance for both their security and development needs from wherever they can get it, without a manifest alignment with a particular side. Hence, India seeks to strengthen its traditional partnership with many of the island nations, such as Mauritius, the Seychelles, and Madagascar, as well as the African littorals like South Africa, Mozambique, and Kenya, among others.

New Delhi is adequately aware of the prevailing unhappiness in several African circles that the Indo-Pacific strategy of key players excludes African states, that an opportunity to cement bonds between Africa and Asia has been missed, and that the consequent marginalization of Africa is a vital issue that needs to be addressed. This unhappiness is particularly directed at key Asian members of the Global South, such as India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Japan. Hence, this group of Africa's Asian partners should seriously reflect on what they could do to remedy the situation.

In the above context, a close but brief look at India's African engagement and its central thrust may be relevant. New Delhi's policy to deepen and diversify the multi-dimensional cooperation with the African continent has three distinct pillars: Pan-African, regional, and bilateral. During the past 15 years beginning in 2008, considerable progress has been made in building a framework of cooperation at the continental level through the periodically held India-Africa Forum Summit (IAFS), where all issues – political, security, and economic – are deliberated upon and a mutually acceptable policy line is adopted at the highest political level.

The AU enjoyed a significant role in planning for the first and second editions of the IAFS in 2008 and 2011, with the Banjul formula (Bhatia 2015) as the basis of the list of African invitees, but this role seemed reduced at the third summit hosted by India

in 2015, where all 54 African countries were invited. These summits and the follow-up actions taken helped considerably strengthen India's traditional links with the continent. However, the regrettable point at the present juncture is that the fourth summit has been delayed due to COVID-19-related complications and perhaps other factors. This conference needs to be organized soon to sustain a historic initiative taken to bring the two parties – India and Africa – closer together.

The regional dimension refers to New Delhi's endeavours to study and comprehend how the Regional Economic Communities (RECs) have emerged as significant players in moulding developments and decision-making in Africa. Of the multitude of them, eight are officially recognized by the AU. India has had closer interaction with five of them: the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the East African Community (EAC), and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). But even this interaction has slowed down during the Covid period.

Then, there exists an elaborate web of bilateral relations between India and many African countries. Going by the evidence that 18 new embassies were opened by India in Africa in the past five years, the high number of VVIP visits exchanged, the plethora of agreements signed, projects implemented, and programmes on human resource development, economic and cultural cooperation executed, it is fair to stress that the Africa-India relationship is in a good place today. But it deserves constant and careful nurturing by both sides in the future.

While reinforcing the notion that more efforts are needed to strengthen the India-Africa relationship, this author observed in his recent book on this subject that the engagement and interaction between India and Africa are “multi-layered.” The three layers or dimensions are “inter-connected in the sense that bilateral and regional approaches need to fit within the broad framework of India's relationship with Africa at the continental level” (Bhatia 2022, 88).

## **5. Maritime security, AU and India**

As the second-largest continent and the largest island in the world, Africa is endowed with 43 million km<sup>2</sup> covering one-fifth of the earth's surface. It is surrounded by three important oceans: the Mediterranean, the Atlantic, and the Indian Ocean. Thirty-eight African countries are either coastal or island states. Hence, Africa's Maritime Domain

(AMD) offers rich development opportunities. Relevance here is Africa's Integrated Maritime (AIM) Strategy 2050 (African Union 2012). It has identified six major threats and vulnerabilities, as listed below (African Union 2012, 11):

1. Transnational organized crimes in the maritime domain (including money laundering, illegal arms and drug trafficking, piracy and armed robbery at sea, illegal oil bunkering/crude oil theft along African coasts, maritime terrorism, human trafficking, human smuggling, and asylum seekers traveling by sea);
2. Illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing and overfishing, and environmental crimes (including deliberate shipwrecking and oil spillage as well as the dumping of toxic wastes);
3. Natural disasters, marine environmental degradation, and climate change;
4. Strategic communications systems;
5. Vulnerable legal framework; and
6. Lack of and/or poorly maintained aids to navigation, modern hydrographic surveys, up-to-date nautical charts, and
7. maritime safety information in a number of AU member-states.

Issues of maritime security and the quest for the economic development of maritime space figured in the Africa-India dialogue, especially at the third India-Africa Forum Summit. The Delhi Declaration of 2015 included a specific reference to this significant matter (India 2015a):

We note that Africa and India, besides having large landmasses, have very long coastlines and a large number of island territories. We recognize the importance of the oceans and seas to the livelihoods of our peoples and that maritime security is a prerequisite for the development of the Blue/Ocean economy. India would work to support Africa, as appropriate, in the implementation of the AU 2050 Africa's Integrated Maritime (AIM) Strategy in accordance with International Maritime Law.

However, the present difficulty is that this continental-level agreement has not been converted into any specific programme of cooperative activities with India. This vital task needs to be taken up. Meanwhile, the focus has stayed on forging cooperation for maritime security at the bilateral level with select African countries, such as the island nations and a few of the coastal states. Issues concerning the Blue Economy have been largely ignored.

An additional observation about maritime security aspects may be in order here. The visit in August 2022 of the Chinese ‘spy’ ship, Yuan Wang-5, to the Sri Lankan port of Hambantota, despite India’s public protest, highlighted China’s influence, Sri Lanka’s vulnerability, and India’s inability to prevent the visit. With its 350-warship strong battle force, which is larger than the US Navy, China has become, assert experts, a ‘maritime Great Power.’ The takeaway by Arun Prakash, a former chief of naval staff in India, is telling (Prakash 2022):

**Thus, until India can bolster its economic and maritime power and, perhaps, enforce its version of a “Monroe Doctrine,” it will have to live with frequent PLAN presence in the Indian Ocean.**

On 2 September 2022, INS Vikrant, India’s 2<sup>nd</sup> aircraft carrier, was commissioned into the Indian Navy. This warship, the first indigenous aircraft carrier, is expected to enhance India’s capability to counter China’s growing activism in the Indian Ocean. “It enables India to become a maritime power of eminence,” stated Vice Admiral Pradeep Chauhan (retd.), director general of the National Maritime Foundation (Singh 2022a). Stressing that the commissioning of this warship is “a landmark achievement for India,” Abhijit Singh (2022), a naval expert at the Observer Research Foundation, pointed to the benefits and pivotal importance of aircraft carriers in enabling the Indian Navy to shoulder its expanding responsibilities.

## **6. Players in the WIP**

The WIP or the Indian Ocean, east and south of India, was marked by a strong rivalry between the US and the Soviet Union during the Cold War era. This was followed by ‘the unipolar moment’ and the supremacy of the US Navy, after the disintegration of the USSR and the end of the Cold War. Since 2008, China has entered the scene, progressively strengthening its presence and expanding its haul of a naval base in Djibouti, a 99-year lease on the Hambantota Port (which it helped to build), the port/ naval base in Gwadar – a part of BRI, and a deep-sea port in Sittwe that is under construction. This success has been further reinforced by the close partnership arrangements that China has built with several island nations.

During this ongoing phase of the PLAN going places, the US Navy, though equipped with a formidable base at Diego Garcia, has kept a somewhat low profile in

the region. Its resources, energy, and attention have been devoted more to the Gulf region and the Pacific Ocean, with the goal of confronting and curbing China there. The US acts in coordination with the UK and follows the policy to encourage the Indian Navy to play a bigger role in the WIP, shouldering more responsibilities as ‘the first responder.’

In this light, Germany, the Netherlands, and the EU, which announced their Indo-Pacific strategy during the period 2020-21, have shown increased interest in the affairs of the Indo-Pacific region. But generally speaking, much of their attention seems to be devoted to the sub-regions near India and China rather than the WIP. The exception is France, which aptly projects itself as an Indo-Pacific power with a broader vision since its possessions stretch from Reunion to the South Pacific. New Delhi has articulated its readiness to work closely with the EU and its member states. A senior Indian official observed, “The much-awaited EU Strategy on the Indo-Pacific, with its Team Europe approach and a constructive agenda for the region, has also opened up several possibilities for collaboration, not just at the level of the EU but also at the bilateral level with partner countries like Germany.”

But when it comes to France, a major strategic partner, India went ahead and undertook joint military exercises such as ‘La Perouse’ (together with the other Quad partners) and also the bilateral naval exercise ‘Varuna’ with the French Navy alone; assisting France to be admitted into the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), and gaining entry into the Indian Ocean Commission as an observer, with French help. However, whether Paris fully shares New Delhi’s escalating concern over the growing activities of China’s People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) remains a matter of discussion among experts.

Great power competition in the WIP is a reality. It is likely to stay with us for a long time. An obvious but often neglected question is: where do African nations – both island countries and the littorals – stand on this subject and what do they really want? Recent research has attempted to shed fresh light on this facet. Two assessments are particularly useful in this context.

Darshana M. Baruah (2022) of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, a specialist in Indian Ocean affairs, offers at least two reliable takeaways based on a dialogue of island nations of the Indo-Pacific held in September 2021. One, she pointed out that the island nations, whether located in the Indian Ocean or the Pacific Ocean, are concerned about non-traditional security threats such as climate change, illegal, unregulated, and unreported (IUU) fishing, piracy, plastic pollution, and oil spills



as “the biggest security threats.” Two, unlike the western powers and their partners, which are worried about China’s construction of “dual-use infrastructure”, the local stakeholders/nations are found to be “sympathetic to Beijing and its interests.” She noted, “Not only do the islands recognize China’s newfound interest in their regions as an opportunity, but they also acknowledge that China’s attention has facilitated renewed focus on the region from traditional players, too” (Baruah 2022). The overall conclusion drawn was that the specific perspective of the smaller nations situated in the Indo-Pacific needs to be factored in by the Great Powers and other players in their policies towards the region.

In an edited volume, Abhishek Mishra of the Observer Research Foundation (ORF) argued that the maritime domain is “undoubtedly vital for Africa to achieve peace, security and development”; that they (i.e., African nations) are now framing appropriate policies on maritime security, but “their ability to exert agency while engaging with external powers has been limited due to capacity and resource constraints” (Mishra 2021, 5). Contributors to the volume took pains to explain the viewpoints of Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, South Africa, Nigeria, Djibouti, Mauritius, and the Seychelles. The publication aptly noted:

Africa’s role and place in the Indo-Pacific are neither defined nor clearly articulated. But the African countries must determine which specific agendas of the Indo-Pacific –maritime security, maritime ecology and resources, capacity building and information sharing, maritime connectivity, and disaster management—to focus on going forward.

Without doing this, “they will miss out on participating in the decision-making processes on maritime security issues” (Mishra 2021, 6).

## 6. Players in the WIP

The foregoing analysis offers a complex and evolving collage of policies, perceptions, and perspectives on Africa’s role in the WIP.

In conclusion, this author’s extensive study of the subject for the past decade and his past work experience as a diplomat in several Indo-Pacific states for nearly two decades encourage him to offer a set of five policy suggestions, as below:

- I. Relevant African governments and the AU need to update the AIM Strategy

2050 (crafted in 2012) and create a mechanism for dialogue with selected Indo-Pacific partners on the entire range of issues with a bearing on Africa's maritime domain.

- II. With India in particular, the proposed dialogue may be arranged under the auspices of the IAFS. The fourth summit, which should be convened as soon as possible, would be an ideal platform to reflect on how Africa's marginalization in policymaking relating to the Indo-Pacific can be gradually ended.
- III. The Working Group on Blue Economy, established by the IORA in 2019, should be urged to reinvigorate its activities and project its views, suggestions, and conclusions regionwide. African scholars and the media have an important role to play in this process by highlighting the potential benefits of the sustainable use of vast oceanic resources.
- IV. India's G20 presidency, which runs from December 2022 to November 2023, should be fully leveraged to fix the international spotlight on bringing Africa into the mainstream of international politics, economy, and diplomacy. An immediate and effective way is to admit the AU as a full-fledged member of this prestigious and influential multilateral grouping, often depicted as the world's premier forum for international economic cooperation.
- V. Finally, a suitable UN agency should be persuaded to host an International Conclave on the theme of 'Africa in the Indo-Pacific' to raise awareness of the vital stakes involved and to drive inclusive, equitable, and consensus-based policymaking in the future.

It is hoped that the African academic community will accord appropriate consideration to these suggestions, modify and adapt them as needed, and then recommend them for serious examination and implementation by the relevant African governments, RECs, and the AU.

In a recent address at the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA), Dr Sanjaya Baru, a veteran editor and scholar, observed, "The geopolitics and geo-economics of the Indian Ocean region compel the littoral and island states to work within a framework of regional development and regional security, conscious of the fact that in the post-Second World War period the Indian Ocean has not been a theatre of conflict, while the Atlantic and Pacific remain so" (Indian Council of World Affairs 2022). This assessment helps us draw the obvious conclusion that the states in the WIP region need to deepen mutual cooperation, while also seeking a broad consensus on the role of the outside powers.

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# Maritime Strategies in the European Union for the Indo-Pacific - What Role for Africa?

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## Abstract

The European Union and its member states have developed a set of strategies for the Indo-Pacific region. Recognising that regions are constantly subject to reinterpretation, negotiation, and contestation, this paper analyses the EU's framing of the Indo-Pacific as an exercise in territorial delineation, justifications for interference, projected regional attributes, and relations with actors in the region. Particular attention is dedicated to the role attributed to the African countries constituting the western shore of the Indo-Pacific.

The paper examines the four Indo-Pacific strategies that have emerged since the EU 2018 within, namely the strategies launched by France, Germany, the Netherlands, and the EU. It highlights and compares the differences and similarities between them and argues that although the four strategies agree on many priorities, especially commercial interests, there are notable differences in terms of projected military involvement and the framing of China. Considerable divergences unfold with respect to Africa, both regarding its belonging to the Indo-Pacific and the role it is expected to play. Only the EU and French documents develop a strategic approach towards Africa, notably



through regional organisations. Yet they concede little agency to the African actors. Given the fragmented and unilateral approach of the four strategies, the scope for Euro-African collaboration in the Indo-Pacific remains uncertain.

## 1. Introduction

Although world regions tend to be presented as geographic facts, their shape and identity are permanently subject to reinterpretation, negotiation, and contestation. What and who is part of a region can be defined on multiple political, social, economic, and historic criteria, and the dominant narrative can rapidly evolve. Even where regions have become institutionalised with rigid borders, as in the European Union (EU), the territorialisation and the delineation of borderlines is a dynamic process, not least with every member state that leaves and joins the EU.

World regions are predominantly defined as an amalgamation of national territories, where the oceans have a liminal or even marginal function. The latter are usually considered to divide world regions rather than to constitute the centre of a region. This terra-centric division of the world poses a challenge to understanding regional dynamics that span over two or more continents. Maritime regions that are centred around an ocean rather than divided by it will invariably be constituted by states belonging to different regions. This poses a challenge for foreign and security policy, which is structured around territorial compartmentalisations that assume commonalities and specificities within a region and is therefore treating regions distinctly from each other. Although the terra-centric division of the world allows for functional transcendence, coastlines remain fundamental barriers. For instance, the European Union has a long tradition of institutionalised trade and development relations with a group of former European colonies in Africa, the Caribbean, and the Pacific. However, despite the interregional nature of this group, the maritime spaces linking the countries are only considered marginally important.

The challenge is thus not primarily theoretical, as the concept of regions allows in principle for maritime spaces to occupy a central role in generating interdependence between riparian societies, even if oceans are in themselves not permanently inhabited. It is rather the dominant interpretation and application in foreign and security policies that provides obstacles to engaging with maritime spaces. To break terra-centrism in its regional and interregional approaches, the European Union has engaged in several attempts over the past decades to delineate regions around maritime spaces. However, the outcome has been mixed. Attempts to generate momentum around the Mediterranean and the Black Sea are largely seen as failures, while Arctic as well as Baltic Sea cooperation have produced a number of results (Kausch and Youngs 2009; Ciută 2008).



Recently, a new maritime space made its entry into the regional imaginary of the European Union and has, despite its topographic distance from EU capitals, generated an unprecedented production of maritime strategies: the Indo-Pacific.

From around 2005, analysts and politicians from India, Australia, and Japan heavily promoted the notion of conflating the Indian and Pacific oceans into one regional space. The US followed suit as part of its “Pacific Pivot,” and eventually the EU and several of its member states developed their own interpretations of what the Indo-Pacific should entail and advocated for a prominent role for themselves within this regional delineation (Medcalf 2019).

Notably, this is not the first time that Europeans have promoted the notion that the Indo-Pacific should be conceived as one natural, social, and political space. During the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich, German geographer Karl Haushofer advocated for an Indo-Pacific that would constitute a common political space to be freed from the UK, the US, France, The Netherlands, and Portugal (Li 2022). However, contemporary foreign policy-making does not situate itself in this tradition. This paper examines the Indo-Pacific strategies that have emerged within the EU since 2008. It highlights the differences between them and the place in terms of territorial delineation, justification, projected attributes, and relations with actors in the region. Given the scope of the journal, particular attention will also be given to the role attributed to Africa as the western shore of this maritime space, as well as concrete initiatives under the Indo-Pacific umbrella that involve Africa.

The four strategies are France’s 2019 Indo-Pacific Strategy, the German Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific from 2020, the Dutch 2020 Indo-Pacific Guidelines for Strengthening Dutch and EU Cooperation with Partners in Asia, and finally the European Union’s 2021 Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, which provides a framework for coherent foreign policy of all 27 member states. The four strategies differ in terms of their formal status and their prescriptive weight (Wacker 2021), but they all reflect the strategic importance that is attributed to the region. Other EU countries have so far not developed their own strategy, suggesting that they have other geographic priorities, especially Eastern European countries, but also Spain and Portugal, which, like France and The Netherlands, have an imperial legacy in the Indo-Pacific, which could be indicative of the EU strategy serving as a consensual substitute for additional national strategies.

## 2. Territorial delineation

Although the Indo-Pacific carries a number of oceanographic and geological connotations that cannot be altered, the delineation of the region is nevertheless subject to political narratives and imaginaries. The inclusion and exclusion of specific countries follows ideological, geostrategic, and commercial logics. Both external and internal actors take advantage of the opportunity to delineate the borders of the Indo-Pacific to their advantage and according to their worldviews.

The European Union and its members are no exception. They define the boundaries in sufficiently vague terms to be compatible with the conceptions of other actors and to leave sufficient space for adaptations in the future.

The EU and France adopt the same delineation of the Indo-Pacific as a “region spanning from the east coast of Africa to the Pacific Island States” and a “space [...] extending from the eastern shores of Africa to the Pacific” respectively. This notion is particularly broad by only defining the lateral borders, without clearly defining where this space ends in terms of latitude. The delineation also provides a self-centred frame, as the French (and hence EU) overseas territories are precisely located off the eastern coast of Africa and in the South Pacific Ocean.

The German notion is even broader, encompassing “the entire region characterised by the Indian Ocean and the Pacific”. Since both the Indian Ocean and the Pacific are highly interpretable terms, the conflation is equally generic.

The Netherlands is more specific by referring to “the countries around the Indian and Pacific Oceans, including the South China and East China Seas. The shipping routes through the Indian and Pacific Oceans that link Europe with Asia and Oceania are central to the concept. The region extends from Pakistan to the islands of the Pacific.” This definition emphasises the Indo-Pacific as a lane of transport and therefore implies a more functional understanding, though a continuity with the historic space of the Dutch Empire can also be inferred.

## 3. Justification

The EU and its members did without strategies for the Indo-Pacific for a long time and have not devised strategies for each and every world region. In addition, there is no documented demand from the Indo-Pacific region toward the EU and its members to

come up with a strategy. Therefore, all four strategies need to justify their existence, not least due to the resource allocation they imply. Perhaps unsurprisingly, since it sees itself as an integral part of the Indo-Pacific, France is rather unapologetic in its strategy, while the Netherlands, given their less prominent role in global affairs, go to great lengths to justify the existence of their strategic approach.

All four actors highlight how economically and geopolitically important they consider the Indo-Pacific. The extensive size of the region is exacerbated by the generous inclusion of territories that are remote from the sea, and allows to attribute a major share of the world's population and economy to the region. Although this attribution easily provides a rationale of importance, it is too generic to provide a strategic notion, as other delineations such as Asia would provide similar or higher numbers. The same applies to narratives of climate change, the SDGs or development aid, which remain too generic to warrant a specific Indo-Pacific strategy.

A more compelling justification can be found in the notion of competition. All documents describe the attempts of regional and global actors to increase their influence in the region. Although it remains unclear how influence is measured, there is a sense of having to halt a process that would result in a marginal position in the region (Kirchner 2022).

Security concerns also play a prominent role in the justifications for the strategies. This entails rising tensions such as border disputes, piracy and militarisation. The potential for escalation, including use of nuclear weapons, is comparatively high, thus providing the region with a distinctive security character (López-Aranguren 2022). Germany and the Netherlands tend to frame security concerns through a commercial lens, as they are primarily seen as detriments to the trade lanes and value chains their economies are involved in. In addition, there are pertinent concerns for international law and borders.

France also emphasises its own role within the multilateral international order, which is supported by its substantial military presence in the region and underpins ambitions to be involved in the main critical junctures, specifically between China and its neighbours as well as between South and North Korea. The overseas territories also mean that France conceives the Indo-Pacific as its immediate neighbourhood (Haldar 2022). Economic development and a conflict-free environment are thus part of a strategy to ensure the prosperity of its own citizens in the region.

## 4. Projected attributes

Closely linked to the justification for an Indo-Pacific strategy is its practical purpose, which can be derived from the functional attribution that is made to the region. Producing a region can serve a range of functions along political, economic, cultural and social lines, and in the case of the Indo-Pacific there is notable conflation of defining the region in terms of its commercial and security dimensions. The four strategies outline a number of characteristics for the space that the EU and its members seek to foster.

Several elements that are projected to the Indo-Pacific reflect the values that the European Union has defined for itself. Most prominently, the promotion of the Indo-Pacific as a democratic, multilateral and rules-based space reflects foreign policy visions based on international law and human rights. The projected Indo-Pacific also seeks to serve the European economies, notably by safeguarding the French Exclusive Economic Zones and by providing the EU's industries with essential goods and services for their value chains. To this effect, the Indo-Pacific should be bound by trade and investment treaties with the EU that also promote European standards and norms. In terms of security, the strategies foresee an Indo-Pacific where existing conflicts are not necessarily solved but at least give way to a stable status quo that prevents further tensions. France in particular highlights its ambitions in terms of military cooperation, and on the EU-level the Operation Atalanta is also seen as a mission that has showcased the willingness and capacity to become a security provider in the Indo-Pacific (Pejsosa 2019). There is no ambitious aspiration of turning the Indo-Pacific into a space free of nuclear weapons or a demilitarised zone, but there is a clear interest in enabling a region where military powers are counterbalanced in a way to prevent escalation. The Indo-Pacific is furthermore defined as a biosphere under threat, with the projection of climate change mitigation and sustainable ocean management as areas where the EU sees itself as a global leader. The Indo-Pacific as a digitally connected region is also highlighted in the strategies with a projection of technological transfer as well as research and innovation.

## 5. Relations with actors in the Indo-Pacific

The strategies do not only outline what they pursue in terms of activities - from trade agreements to conflict mediation - but they also define who the preferred partners are.

The four strategies put particular emphasis on relations with regional organisations in the Indo-Pacific. Although there is no overarching institution encompassing the entire Indo-Pacific, regional organisations cover its sub-sections. Working with and providing support to regional organisations is closely linked to the EU's aspiration to enhance its own international status (Mattheis and Wunderlich 2017). The EU does not only consider itself to be a multilateral actor, but also a successful instance of regional integration, which warrants recognition and emulation elsewhere. Although there are limits to the influence of the EU in regional organisations in the Indo-Pacific, interregional relations are vital, as they offer the EU with an entry point among peers inside the region, for instance through the institutionalised Asia-Europe Meetings (ASEM).

The regional organisation that is most frequently mentioned in the strategies is the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN), which has strong ties with the EU, both in terms of financial support and transfer of ideas (Wacker 2021). As a result, the relationship with ASEAN has been upgraded to a strategic partnership in 2020, which entails more high-level encounters and an increase of development aid to the organisation. France also underlines the Indian Ocean Commission and the Indian Ocean Rim Association, given that the country is a full member thanks to its overseas territories. Germany also enumerates a number of organisations that it has been supporting with development aid, such as the Mekong River Commission and the Pacific Island Forum. The strategies thus reflect the ambition to not only deepen existing ties with regional organisations, but also to develop a joint interregional approach to the Indo-Pacific, which would constitute a competitive advantage for the EU over other external actors that appear as individual nation-states. Gaining influence in regional organisations holds the promise of fostering groups of allies that are able to provide a counterbalance to other powers, in particular China.

The strategies take stock of the countries in the Indo-Pacific that already have a productive and institutionalised relationship with the EU, and that could serve as pillars for a more concerted approach to the Indo-Pacific. Thailand, Malaysia and the Maldives are mentioned by the EU, while France highlights India, Japan, Indonesia, Singapore, Vietnam, Malaysia, South Korea and New Zealand. Meanwhile, the Netherlands and Germany mention bilateral ties for specific policy fields but are more cautious in singling out specific countries by more generically speaking of like-minded countries to allude to partnerships that should be deepened.

The EU also spells out that institutionalised relations are needed with the country

that is in all strategies implicitly or explicitly considered as posing the biggest challenge to implementing the ambitions for the Indo-Pacific, namely China (Mohan 2020). Even though all strategies identify the rivalry between China and the US as a source of concern, they diverge in terms of whether to consider China a rival of the EU. While Germany highlights the cooperation with China, France more openly frames China as a source of challenges to the desired vision of the Indo-Pacific. Finding a balance between increasing the EU's presence as a security actor and preventing a backlash by China thus remains delicate (Nováky 2022). Such differences are reflective of a broader dissonance within the EU, with some countries becoming deeply entangled economically and with hard infrastructure, and others being more wary of China's relationship with human rights and international law (Pejsova 2021). In this perspective, promoting the Indo-Pacific as a region is also an attempt to create a region that is large enough for China not to be the unequivocal dominant power.

With respect to other countries perceived as problematic in the Indo-Pacific, the strategies prefer to circumvent or even bracket them. In particular, Iran and Saudi-Arabia, though riparian states, are usually excluded from the projected Indo-Pacific cartography, and Somaliland is not referred to.

## 6. The role for Africa

One of the aspects where the four strategies differ substantially is the role provided to Africa within the Indo-Pacific. To Germany and the Netherlands, Africa is simply not part of the Indo-Pacific as they conceive it and the continent is therefore excluded from their strategies altogether. France explicitly includes all African states that border the Indian Ocean, which reflects the location of its overseas territories Mayotte and Réunion. It is a member state of two regional organisations that are either otherwise composed of African states (the Indian Ocean Commission, IOC) or at least inclusive of African states (the Indian Ocean Rim Association).

The IOC is a peculiar organisation because it operates outside the realm of the African Union. It is composed of five member states (Union of the Comoros, France, Madagascar, Mauritius and the Seychelles) and provides regional governance in the fields of economy, development and security. The bulk of the funding is provided by France and the EU (France Diplomacy n.d.).

Being a full member of an organisation composed of smaller states provides France with the opportunity and legitimacy to act as a regional power by intervening

in domestic crises, such as the coup d'état in Madagascar (Witt 2020). Through the funding of regional programmes of the IOC, the EU also exerts influence in shaping policies, notably in the field of maritime security, by promoting cooperation between national law enforcement. The IOC also serves as a platform to amplify European influence by expanding IOC programmes such as the Promotion of Maritime Security and involving other regional organisations that are covering the African shores of the Indo-Pacific, such as the East African Community, in the combat against piracy and other security challenges.

Like France, the EU is also considering Africa to be part of the region and particularly underlines the established interregional relations with organisations such as the African Union, the Southern African Development Community and the East African Community. It also frames the institutionalised relations with the Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States as being conducive to Indo-Pacific cooperation, thus positioning the EU as a common hub for states in the region.

At the country level, only South Africa is mentioned as the potential regional power to collaborate with in the Indo-Pacific. Among the absences, Kenya is the most notable, especially given the importance that other actors such as Japan have given to the country in their approach to the Indo-Pacific.

## **7. Concrete initiatives involving Africa**

Prior to the publication of the four strategies, the European Union and its member states were already carrying out or taking part in multiple initiatives in the Indo-Pacific region, both on traditional maritime security issues such as freedom of navigation and the fight against piracy, as well as on emerging challenges such as climate change. While there are some initiatives with a special focus on Asia, such as the EU-ASEAN High level on Maritime Security Cooperation launched in 2013, or the ESIWA Project (Enhancing Security Cooperation in and with Asia) established in 2020 and funded by the EU, France and Germany, a notable number of initiatives are taking place on the east and south coasts of Africa.

The main EU actions involving Africa are either funded and implemented by the EU and/or its member states, or funded by the EU and/or its member states, but coordinated by regional and multilateral organisations such as the IOC, The Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), East African Community (EAC), The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and international

organisations such as The International Criminal Police Organisation (INTERPOL) or the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

The maritime capacity building initiative CRIMARIO (Critical Maritime Routes Indo-Pacific) is an example of EU funding and implementation by a member state (expertise by France). CRIMARIO is a project launched in 2015, extended in 2020 until 2024 and aims to improve security and safety in the Indian Ocean. Among the key objectives of this project is the promotion of information exchange and analysis between the countries of the Wider Indian Ocean, with a particular focus on some countries and archipelagos of East Africa. The Indo-Pacific Regional Information Sharing (IORIS) platform has been one of the relevant initiatives to meet this objective, as well as capacity building and training activities (CRIMARIO n.d.).

The EU Naval Force Somalia - Operation Atalanta is another relevant initiative on the African coast. The operation was launched in 2008 and in 2020 was extended to December 2022. Its mandate has been evolving but maintaining the focus of protecting the vessels of the World Food Program and preventing and combating piracy and armed robbery at sea. In addition to the Somali Coastal territory, territorial and internal Waters, Operation Atalanta covers the Southern Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden and a large part of the Indian Ocean. Its funding comes from EU member states, but participation in the operation has included third states such as Norway, Montenegro, Serbia and Ukraine (EUNAVFOR n.d.). Similarly, in a non-military approach, the EU is pursuing another initiative to contribute to the development of maritime security in Somalia. Through its Capacity Building Mission in Somalia (EUCAP Somalia) established in 2012 and extended until 2022 in 2020, the EU aims to contribute to the development of a self-sustaining wider policy capacity (EUCAP 2022).

Among the main EU initiatives in which regional and international organisations participate in the implementation is the Regional Programme for the Promotion of Maritime Safety (MASE), linking together several regional organisations. Although MASE ended in 2020, Under its framework two centres were established: the Seychelles Regional Operational Coordination Centre (RCOC) and the Regional Maritime Information Fusion Centre (RMIFC), based in Madagascar. The RMIFC is responsible for exchanging and sharing maritime information and alerting the RCOC of any abnormal activity at sea, while the RCOC is responsible for carrying out joint actions at sea (RCOC 2019).

The Port Security and Safety of Navigation programme for Eastern and Southern Africa is another EU-funded initiative but implemented by other actors with stakes in



the Region's security challenges . This programme launched in 2020 with a four-year mandate and is coordinated by the IOC and implemented jointly by the International Maritime Organisation (IMO), INTERPOL and UNODC. The programme benefits nine countries on the east and southern coasts of Africa and among its objectives are the strengthening of national capacities to secure maritime passage (UNODC n.d.).

Taken together these concerted efforts to intervene directly in the regional security architecture highlight the relevance of interregionalism and development aid for the European approach to the Indo-Pacific. They also document the increasing geographic expansion of maritime security initiatives in Africa, which has not yet fully connected with the Indo-Pacific at large, but provides an institutional foundation to position the EU as a central actor in this field.

## 8. Conclusions

The four Indo-Pacific strategies by the EU and three of its members (France, Germany, and The Netherlands) represent a sustained effort to take part in the creation of the Indo-Pacific as a region, by advocating for specific delineations, attributes and partnerships which should define this space.

By putting the maritime space at the centre of geostrategic thinking, the strategies differ substantially from most interregional approaches pursued by the EU and its members which tend to be confined to terra-centric containers. Engaging with the Indo-Pacific in a dedicated manner entails entangling some of established intercontinental relationships. In particular, this shift of demarcations has the potential to unhinge interactions with Africa, especially if regional organisations such as the IOC or the EAC are being situated in an Indo-Pacific rather than African context.

The four strategies agree on many fundamentals, in particular regarding how the governance of the Indo-Pacific should be based on international law, multilateralism, free trade, connectivity with Europe, and climate change mitigation.

The strategies also agree on the importance of cooperating with regional organisations in the Indo-Pacific, which is in line with the own regional integration process in the EU. The EU is already well placed to be an influential position in many regional organisations in the Indo-Pacific and fostering those organisations has the potential to reduce, or at least curb, the dominant position of regional powers and provide the EU and its members with the legitimacy to be involved in regional policy-making.

However, there are also notable differences between the four strategies in terms of projected military involvement, the framing of China, and the role of Africa. Several differences can be traced back to the unique position of France, which - unlike other EU members - does not consider itself to be an external actor but an integral part of the region through its territories in the Indo-Pacific. By being a full member of the IOC and the IORA, France depicts clear ambitions to assume the role of a regional power, similar to its entanglements in Central Africa (Mattheis 2021). This assertiveness entails a different approach to regional security and geopolitical rivalry in comparison to the German and Dutch strategies, which tend to associate security with the facilitation of commercial activities.

The commercial emphasis of these two countries on trade routes and value chains also help to explain the exclusion of Africa from the Indo-Pacific. By contrast, France and subsequently the EU are unambiguous about the necessity to include the Western shores of the Indian Ocean, not least because the overseas territories and the influence in regional organisations in eastern and southern Africa provide the basis to consolidate and expand the EU's and France's presence to other parts of the Indo-Pacific. Yet, even though these two strategies explicitly include Africa, they concede little agency to African actors. How Euro-African collaboration could look like in the wider Indo-Pacific, remains unclear. It thus has to ultimately be up to the political forces in Africa to claim their agency and to define how the EU and its members can contribute to an African interpretation of the Indo-Pacific.

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# China's Alternate Gaze towards the Indo-Pacific

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## Abstract

China's perspective of the Indo-Pacific as a set of strategies initially developed by Japan but mainly driven by the United States (US), appears to be shifting. Beijing originally viewed such approaches as directly countering its influence in the mega-region of the same name. Yet, more recently China has made pronouncements that seem to suggest its relative support of particular state and regional organisation's Indo-Pacific strategies. This article explores this changing perspective and the dilemmas facing China as a rising global power in a liberal international order through the lens of strategic narratives. On the one hand China understands that it needs to engage the global system and cannot isolate from it, and at the same time, Beijing seeks to challenge the US-led liberal international order to achieve its ambitions.

This dual approach is explained through China's use of alternative diplomacy and is further explored through two examples. The first is China's engagement in the Western Indo-Pacific and specifically Africa (an emphasis of this journal volume), where it remains a strategic partner in the political and tangible economic sense. Secondly, at the conceptual level, the Indo-Pacific is not yet an institutionalised concept and its contours and future are left open to interpretation. Since allegiances and interests are shifting, China has the opportunity to contribute to the very ideas and norms that inform what



the 'Indo-Pacific' means in ways that can further its own strategic interests.

**Keywords:** Indo-Pacific, Indian Ocean, Asia-Pacific, China–Africa, Global South, Belt and Road Initiative, strategic narrative, discourse power, world order

## 1. Introduction

Unlike the other states featured in this edition, China is an anomaly in the conversation on the Indo-Pacific that encapsulates various strategies related to the geo-economic and geo-political aspects of the Indian and Pacific oceans, predominantly promoted by the US and its partners. China's growing influence – and aggression in places like the South China Sea – has been singled out as a challenge to the existing global order originally established during the Cold War with the US-led Western bloc, which then expanded globally in the 1990s. In response China initially rejected the notion of the Indo-Pacific viewing it as a strategy to contain it that has implications for China's own security environment as well as its trans-regional Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In fact, in reaction to the revival of the Quad grouping in 2018 – represented by Australia, India, Japan and the US, all of which subscribe to the idea of the Indo-Pacific as a foreign policy concept – China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi remarked that the group was simply a 'headline grabbing' idea and it would soon dissipate like 'sea foam' (The Times of India 2018). Two years later during a visit to Malaysia, Wang further remarked that the group posed a security risk as an 'Indo-Pacific NATO' that would spur geopolitical competition and a Cold War mentality (Rej 2020). China's hesitance in supporting an Indo-Pacific concept is also reflected by the absence of an explicit strategy towards it and persistent referral to the 'Asia-Pacific region' instead, even when officials are asked about the former (Liu 2020).

However, a further shift took place where, instead of resistance, China appeared to support selected state and regional approaches to the Indo-Pacific (detailed in next section). This suggests the softening of China's attitude from one of complete rejection of the Indo-Pacific idea to that of accommodation. This would not be the first time that Beijing has seen fit to pivot in response to the region's tepid response to a Chinese-led initiative – this was the case of the BRI, where China rebranded it as a work-in-progress following concerns as to its underlying intentions – and it bears closer analysis.

This article will endeavour to understand China's changing approach to the Indo-Pacific. In the current liberal international order, China displays two seemingly contrary approaches where it is both deepening its engagement within the current system, and simultaneously challenging it with alternative diplomacy. While in rhetoric, China displays support for the growing adoption of Indo-Pacific strategies, Beijing continues to counter the concept in other ways. This opposition is reflected upon in two instances: China's actual engagement in the Western Indo-Pacific and more specifically Africa

(a focus area of this volume), where it is inextricably a part of the mega-region in the tangible, geographical sense. Then in a context where the Indo-Pacific remains undefined and has yet to gain widespread acceptance on its physical boundaries and shared meaning amongst states, China's new position in accepting the concept provides Beijing an opportunity to help chart the course of the ideas that will increasingly inform it.

## **2. The Indo-Pacific: conceptual framework on strategic narratives and China's response**

### ***2.1 Great power competition reframed as strategic narrative for the 21st century***

Whether characterised as a visionary reimagining the Asia-Pacific, or as a concrete operationalising of grand strategy, the notion of the Indo-Pacific is rooted in great power competition amongst Asian states and the US. In the first instance it is a by-product of expanding economic competition between Asian powers for markets in and around the Pacific and Indian oceans. This economic competition has significant developmental dimensions reflecting the fact that the protagonists are emerging economies, namely China and India as well as established economies like Japan and the US. Secondly, the Indo-Pacific is a response to the increasingly fractious relations between a rising China determined to assert its territorial claims in the South China Sea against the position of the US as a security guarantor of the regional status quo. China's maritime expansion through port infrastructure development along the countries of the Indian Ocean coastal littoral and its deployment of its 'blue water' navy, point to its broader regional ambitions. Thirdly, the Indo-Pacific is focused implicitly (if not explicitly) on conceptually countering the BRI's ideological framing of the restoration of China's leading economic and political role in the Eurasian land mass and Indian Ocean region. It is an alternative vision founded on Asian support for maintaining the US-led liberal international order.

The literature on strategic narratives offers insights into the framing – and reframing – of international politics in which foreign policy can be more readily and successfully pursued. According to Rosselle, O'Loughlin and Miskimmon (2017):

Put simply, strategic narratives are tools that political actors employ to promote



their interests, values, and aspirations for the international order by managing expectations and altering the discursive environment. These narratives define “who we are” and “what kind of world order we want.”

Roselle (2017) also recognises the importance of leaders in articulating and projecting strategic narratives:

The formation, projection, and reception of narratives can be understood through careful study of leadership narratives found in speeches, analysis of media structure and content, and through an assessment of public opinion polling results and focus group audience narratives.

In this context, media (including social media) and public diplomacy become tools to project strategic narratives into target regions and communicate intent to foreign audiences and domestic publics. This media ecology characterises the ambit within which strategic narratives evolve, propagate and are received by targeted actors. According to Peters (2015), they hold greater significance as ‘civilisational ordering devices’ that communicate from the powerful to other states and societies.

During the Cold War great power strategic narratives helped build alliance systems and mobilise domestic politics for costs and use of force. Post-Cold War strategic narratives subsumed the bipolar narratives of competition to lay a foundation for the new era of US dominance and democratic ascendancy (the era of ‘globalization’ and ‘end of history’). Neoliberalism, which championed the promotion of liberal market economies and democratic polities, became the ideological cornerstone of the liberal international order under conditions of US unipolarity. American foreign and economic interests were embedded in the ideological and institutional manifestations of the liberal international order (Ruggie 1982). The restructuring of regions across the world in what scholars called New Regionalism, created or enhanced regional institutions oriented towards open markets such as the Asia Pacific Economic Conference (APEC) founded in 1989 and furthered through the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

The notion that a country can attain increased geopolitical power by setting international agendas that profoundly influence the political order and values both domestically and in foreign countries suited Beijing, especially as it grappled with the problems of asserting its global position in this established US-led liberal international order. As early as 2012, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) recognised that developing

and operationalising strategic narratives that frame global agendas would place China in a better position to achieve its foreign policy objectives. Characterised as discourse power by Chinese scholars, this new approach featured as part of the adoption of ‘Great Power Diplomacy with Chinese characteristics’ (GPD) at 18th CCP Congress<sup>1</sup>. President Xi Jinping built on earlier efforts to promote Chinese influence and norms-making through increasing China’s active involvement in international conferences and institutions. According to Masaaki (2022,16-17):

(A)n important source of such influence is not the coercive statements of government agencies, but the structural domination of the international discourse space through the leadership in setting international norms and standards. Thus, the competition for international discourse power among countries is, in effect, a competition for discourse power over the setting of international rules (Masaaki 2022,16-17).

The information space, powered by media and online platforms, offers China an effective alternative to its prior “non-intervention” stance by allowing the country to project the “China Story”—i.e., to project the positive image through storytelling in the media landscape, both domestic and abroad (Roberts 2020). The earliest iterations of the BRI – the ‘Iron Silk Road’ and the ‘Maritime Silk Road’ launched in 2013 – were manifestations of this new thinking and sought to galvanize governments across the Eurasian land mass, South and Southeast Asian area, the Middle East, and the Horn of Africa.

It is in this context that the debates on ‘Indo-Pacific’ can be placed. As a concept, it displaces the abiding economic logic of ‘new regionalism’ prevalent in the 1990s and manifested in the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) (and its successor CPTPP<sup>2</sup>). China saw relative success in getting states to sign up to the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), a competitor to the TPP/CPTPP, as well as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) against US active resistance. Coupled to this were deepening security competition in the South China Sea and East China Sea that has spawned its own strengthening of institutionalised approaches to security, including expansion of the China-led Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), the revival of

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1 A party congress held every five years.

2 Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership

the US-led Quad and the hedging strategies by ASEAN.

Indeed the literature on strategic narratives emphasises how defining the international context, coupled to the application of foreign policy concepts that are geographically informed, helps set the agenda meaningfully reinforced through socialisation. China's willingness to adopt a tactical retreat in the face of obvious tepid support or even resistance to its summary dismissal of the Indo-Pacific demonstrates the limited reach of its own discourse power to date. Support for Chinese leadership through the BRI remains largely transactional amongst partners at this stage, frustrating Beijing's efforts to firm up its alternative to the US-led liberal international order.

However, other regional 'theatres' of the Indo-Pacific such as the Western Indian Ocean, lack a distinctive story for great power – and local state actors' – involvement. In other words, a strategic narrative that can serve as an organising principle. This gap enabled China's BRI to achieve greater recognition and local acceptance in the Western Indian Ocean and Africa. Given the relative strength of China's position within Africa, an expansion that includes the Western Indo-Pacific, there may be ample opportunity for Beijing to exert afresh its influence over this evolving concept.

## ***2.2 The rise of Indo-Pacific strategies and China's response***

The origin of the term 'Indo-Pacific'<sup>3</sup>, as it is currently applied, dates back to former Japanese Prime Minister Shinto Abe who spoke of the 'confluence of the two seas' in his address to the Indian Parliament in 2007 (Abe 2007). Further details of the idea were outlined when Abe (2016) proposed 'the union of two free and open oceans and two continents' in his opening speech at the sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) in Nairobi in 2016. Abe's reference to the connection of two oceans, in the context of the oldest Asia-Africa summit process, was initiated in 1991 when Japan, still at the peak of its economic power, underscored the degree to which it understood the Indo-Pacific to fundamentally include Africa. Abe's focus on the development dimensions of Japanese-African relations spoke to the centrality of these concerns to promoting of a 'free and open Indo Pacific', and suggested the place that Africa had in the process was primarily as a terrain of great power competition. Indeed, the deliberate emphasis that he placed on 'quality' infrastructure, educational training programmes and even the evocation of Japan's contribution to UN

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3 The use of the term can be traced back to the 1920's, by German geographer, Karl Haushofer.

peacekeeping, all seemed to respond directly to the BRI's expanding policy initiatives in these same sectors underway across the African continent.

The responsiveness on the part of Indian policy makers to the concept has been slow and uneven. Certainly the Indo-Pacific fitted within the ongoing ruminations within the Indian defence community over the country's changing perception of China's role in the region. While elements within the defence establishment had been employing geo-strategic readings to the Indo-Chinese relationship as far back as the early 1960s, these assessments had not taken in the maritime domain to any serious degree. The launching of the Asia-Africa Economic Corridor in May 2017 under the auspices of India and Japan signalled the explicit activation of a developmental dimension of the concept as recognised in Abe's 2016 speech. However, like the India-Africa Forum Summit this seems to have gained little momentum in the face of the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. (See more in the volume's India article). The experiences of Japan and India reflect increased acceptance of the Indo-Pacific concept, amongst some leading Asian states.

In the case of the US, a year after Japan's articulation of the Indo-Pacific, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson echoed the Trump administration's support for the concept, concentrating on the same four themes utilised by the Japanese prime minister. At the same time, whereas Abe had been indirect in his articulation of the concept as an alternative to China's BRI, Tillerson did not mince words in declaring that Chinese development finance was in fact 'predatory economics' (Szechenyi and Hasaya 2019,1). By 2018 the US had formalised its designation of China as a 'strategic competitor' in its National Security Strategy and slowly the machinery of state began to operationalise appropriate policies. A gathering storm of restive domestic sources hostile to China ensured that, despite Trump's replacement by Joe Biden in 2022, a bipartisan consensus on 'containing' China continued. The revival of the Quad – US, Japan, Australia and India – highlighted how central allied security interests were to maintaining a 'free and open Indo Pacific'.

In February 2022, the US published a new Indo-Pacific strategy stating that several of its allies, including the Quad members and some European nations, view the region spanning the Indian and Pacific Oceans as the world's 'centre of gravity' (United States 2022, 4-5). The document explains that the US' renewed attention towards the Indo-Pacific is also due to the mounting challenges in it, with specific mention of China's aggression and acute influence that challenges existing rules and norms. Interestingly, the mention of China preceded other major challenges such as climate change and

the Covid-19 pandemic — a clear statement of the centrality of the ‘China threat’ to defining US interests in the region. The Indo-Pacific appears to be the latest area of contention between the US and China. China set up the BRI in 2013 partly in response to the TPP – part of the US’ strategic pivot towards the Asia Pacific under Obama – and the current Indo-Pacific is in turn frequently cited as a response to China’s BRI engagement in the region (Liu and Dunford 2020).

Beijing’s initial response to the US’ specific strategy was unequivocally hostile (Wang 2022). Yet at the same time, paradoxically, it tacitly acknowledged the ‘Indo-Pacific Initiative’ as a meaningful concept for local actors (Business Standard 2021). The same source states that while China originally spurned the notion of the Indo-Pacific, it specifically “recognised India’s and ASEAN countries’ outlook for a free and open Indo-Pacific region that gained traction among the South East Asian countries”. Wang Yi also declared that China was even willing to work with the US and the Group of Seven’s (G7) Build Back Better World (B3W) initiative, a global infrastructure plan now repurposed as the Partnership for Global Infrastructure Investment (PGII) in 2022 (despite the fact that it is considered a counter to China’s influence and BRI projects) (Tian 2022). These overtures are a marked difference from Wang’s remarks in 2018.

What explains this shift? China’s stance reflects the dilemma of its role as the second-largest global economy where it increasingly displays confidence in its foreign policy, but is aware that its capabilities (such as military) do not yet match that of the US’ (Global Fire Power 2022). Buzan (2010,18) describes China as a reform revisionist where it accepts some international institution such as the Westphalian principle of sovereignty, and it respects the role of the United Nations (UN); but China also seeks to challenge and reform certain liberal order norms and practises that it did not help design. This is reflected in China’s support of alternative economic initiatives, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the BRI.

China, along with like-minded states such as other BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) nations, are aware of the limits of the current global order. Besides the real economic and pragmatic interests involved in this grouping, this also somewhat explains the abstained votes of China and democracies India and South Africa, during the UN vote against Russia’s offensive in Ukraine in March 2022 (Borger 2022). Several other Indo-Pacific states – such as Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam – and even Pacific Island states have been as hesitant to openly condemn Moscow (Grossman 2022). There is growing concern by such states of being caught in a proxy struggle between Russia and the US and the impact thereof, as well as general caution over the

repercussions (such as sanctions) for rising powers who seek to challenge the existing order (Ramani 2022).

While China displays support for certain Indo-Pacific strategies (as noted earlier, in the case of ASEAN and India), it appears particularly focused on building on historical and practical relations with states who are physically situated at the centre of this mega-region. In this way China's and its partners' interests are brought in line through socialisation and interaction. This will be further explored in the next section. Yet, China is not fully in support of the Indo-Pacific as a foreign policy concept, as being driven by the US. Its approach can be read as a form of alternative diplomacy (Wang 2015) where it seeks to create a new international environment without directly challenging existing institutions and ideas.

The remainder of this article will therefore explore how China has engaged the Indo-Pacific in an 'alternative' fashion, where it engages regional partners without directly challenging current structures. First, is its physical and practical engagement in the Western Indo-Pacific region and Africa, which makes its presence difficult to dismiss; and second, is the very fact that the Indo-Pacific is still a concept under construction and therefore affords China the opportunity to contribute to what the idea means.

### **3. China's engagement with the Indo-Pacific**

#### ***3.1 China's role in the Western Indo-Pacific***

The western part of the Indo-Pacific, with particular reference to the African continent, is unevenly accounted for in the strategic documents of various states and international organisations. Africa is not mentioned once in the US' 2022 strategy document; rather, the emphasis is on northeast and southeast Asia and Oceania (including the Pacific islands). There is also much more emphasis on collaboration with Quad members and ASEAN, albeit the new US strategy towards Sub-Saharan Africa (2022) reflects intent to include the region, which declares 'we will integrate African states in Indian Ocean and Indo-Pacific forums...'. India and Japan, on the other hand, as mentioned, view Africa as part of the 'Indo' component of the concept and their shared outlook includes the aspiration to expand Asia and Africa economic links (Wu 2022,4). Meanwhile African partners themselves are yet to formulate strategies towards this increasingly significant mega-region (Wu and Schoeman 2022).

Although China demonstrates support for selected Indo-Pacific outlooks, its BRI is another perspective that overlays this geographic space, and the Indian Ocean is an important component of it. Unlike the Indo-Pacific, which remains largely associated with defence and security approaches – although this could change with the US’ launch of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF)<sup>4</sup> in May 2022 – China’s BRI emphasises development over geopolitics. This focus has in turn contributed to a relatively positive outlook towards China’s economic influence amongst African states as well as their citizens, as outlined by an Afrobarometer survey (Sanny and Selormey 2021).

China has progressively included the African continent in the BRI since late 2015 (Wu 2022,10). By November 2021, two days before the triennial Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) held in Dakar, China’s (2021) State Council Information Office released a China-Africa white paper that dedicated a section to BRI cooperation. This was an advancement from the casual mentioning of the initiative at previous forums. It is also taking note of developments in the western Indo-Pacific. In January 2022, Wang Yi visited Africa as part of an over thirty year tradition of a Chinese foreign minister kickstarting their overseas travel by visiting the continent. This particular trip took place along the African Eastern seaboard, specifically Eritrea, Kenya, and the Comoros (and later, further afield to the Maldives and Sri Lanka). Interestingly vague remarks were also made about developing Eritrea’s Red Sea coastline, which suggests not only the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean but an important connection to the Red Sea (Miriri 2022). This could see China’s engagement overlap with other developments, such as the creation of the Red Sea Council, a new council involving eight countries in the Red Sea Corridor (Globalsecurity.org 2020).

During May 2022, Wang also toured the South Pacific – including the Solomon Islands, Kiribati, Samoa, Fiji, Tonga, Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea, and East Timor – a vast area traditionally in Australia and the US’ orbit. While development partnership with China is welcomed (and is identified as a key area of collaboration with the region for China), the move raised Western anxiety as well as in some Pacific island states, over the potential instability created by military posturing in the region since China’s agreement proposals included the areas of policing and cybersecurity (Global Times

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4 So far, economic initiatives supported by the US, which relate to the Indo-Pacific, have been absent on delivery. For instance, President Biden proposed the Build Back Better World (B3W), a counter infrastructure plan to the BRI at the 2021 G-7 meeting. Yet a year later, the initiative was repackaged as the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII), a scaled back version of the B3W.

2022; Shepherd 2022). This came off the back of China and the Solomon Islands signing a security pact in April 2022. This hesitation highlights the greater value placed on economic development, rather than security, as a basis for cooperation amongst Indo-Pacific states – which was also highlighted in a study by RAND Corporation (2020).

In this respect, China's engagement in Africa offers it a reprieve from geopolitical tensions as seen in the South Pacific as well as other physically removed territorial disputes. It can promote the BRI in Africa because African partners also welcome it and support it. For example, in 2018 leaders from Rwanda, Senegal and South Africa publicly defended that their relations with China were not defined as a debt trap (The South African 2018). Notably, China's partnership with Africa is not simply based on economic interests, there is also political salience. While China-Africa trade rose by a surprising 35% in 2021 amid the Covid-19 pandemic, the continent still only makes up 3.83% of China's total global trade (Mureithi 2022). China is also increasingly showing its support for African peace and security through its role in UN peacekeeping and measures such as the annual meeting with African defence ministers initiated after FOCAC in 2018. In fact, it appointed senior diplomat Xue Bing as special envoy to the Horn of Africa, and this took place around the same time that the US re-appointed a special envoy to the same region (Blinken 2022).

Moreover, the strength of the Chinese position in Africa offers China an opportunity to draw in a host of partner states who, while not uncritical of particular policies and practices it pursues, generally view China's involvement on the continent as a positive-sum gain. Chinese leadership in promoting African interests in global forums is widely acknowledged, its development experience is seen as a model for Africa, and African governments have willingly embraced the language of the BRI in joint communiques at bilateral and regional levels. Such support has had tangible consequences for China's foreign policy and translated to diplomatic backing for Beijing in the UN on a range of issues, be it endorsing China's role in development, or defending its human rights record. In short, the expansion of the Indo-Pacific to include the Western Indian Ocean and in particular coastal and island African states offers an opportunity for China to work within this still fluid conceptual framework from a basis of support of shared interests and even tacit acknowledgement of its leadership.

### *3.2 Negotiating concepts and meanings*



China's BRI emphasises the creation of shared meaning rather than following a prescriptive engagement. With respect to Africa, China supports the AU's development Agenda 2063. In content both Agenda 2063 and the BRI share similar interests, such as transport infrastructure, regional connectivity, and industrialisation (Liu 2021). China emphasises the role of partnerships and the need for support for the BRI, as it is aware that it cannot build mega projects on Chinese financing and construction alone (Aris 2016,2). Likewise, is China's support for certain state approaches to the Indo-Pacific. It seems aware that in a negotiated world order (Chin 2015), gaining support means transcending the US-China global competition narrative to include the perspectives and interests of other partners. This emphasis is important, as neither the US nor China is actually 'winning' outright in terms of their influence amongst Indo-Pacific states (RAND Corporation 2020).

China's role in this mega-region has implications for the development of the Indo-Pacific as a concept. At the moment the Indo-Pacific is still developing at the conceptual level to become a durable foreign policy idea. In this regard, as pointed out by He and Feng (2020,154), to be embedded the concept needs executive (central and operational coordination) and ideational (the ability to influence through new ideas) leadership. Unlike the Indo-Pacific, China's BRI has gained some degree of executive leadership through the funds it has secured, the creation of a BRI summit that has attracted state and multilateral partners in attendance (along with various Memoranda of Understanding signed), and it has even made its way into the language of some commercial banks. By comparison, the Indo-Pacific does not have operational coordination, although this could shift as the Quad – who have driven this concept – have decided to meet more regularly (Rajagopalan 2022).

Importantly, the Indo-Pacific is yet to develop from an ideational perspective as there is not yet widespread acceptance of it as a concept with shared meaning, like the previous Asia-Pacific. For example, the geographic parameters of what constitutes the Indo-Pacific by states who promote it, are not agreed upon (this was illustrated earlier and by other author contributions). There is also no agreement of the parameters of the Indo-Pacific and its focus which, as mentioned, is perceived as largely security focussed. There is, however, interest in expanding the offering as noted by the US' IPEF, but this is still at its early stages. Likewise, the Quad has expanded their focus to include vaccine manufacturing, climate, cybersecurity, infrastructure and research fellowships in STEM fields, although emphasis on peace and stability appear to remain central (Japan MFA 2022).

The Indo-Pacific is still emerging as an institutionalised foreign policy concept and China's efforts to shape this seminal strategic narrative for the 21st century through engagement as opposed to resistance, could focus on the following approaches:

- Overlapping regional economic frameworks: China's role in the Indo-Pacific continues to deepen and like the case of the BRI and Africa, mentioned above, its physical involvement cannot be disregarded in new conceptions of the region: A 2022 CSIS report (Goodman and Arasasingham 2022), notes that the Indo-Pacific region – which interestingly (for the authors of the report) does not include African states – includes members of multiple overlapping economic structures. For example, almost the same number of states (albeit membership make-up differs) that are part of the US' Trade and Investment Framework Agreements (TIIFA) are also members of the BRI. Moreover, there are further options for energy, infrastructure and trade for some members who are also involved in other agreements, such as the RCEP, an agreement between ASEAN members and their free trade agreement partners. China's physical role in the Indo-Pacific would make it difficult to outright exclude it, especially from the perspective of Indo-Pacific states themselves.
- Shifting alliances: The Indo-Pacific is made up of multiple interests or strategies and interpretations. Importantly, the stance of states in this mega-region and even Quad members are still evolving. For instance, there is general hesitance to directly counter China by some Quad member states and their positions depend, to a degree, on China's own aggressive or cooperative stance on issues like the South China sea (Wu 2022:5). Notably, while India is seen as being in competition with China in the Indian Ocean, they also collaborate with China through the BRICS grouping, as reflected to some extent by their parallel positions on the Russia-Ukraine conflict.
- Co-constituted partnerships: China's engagement with Africa reflects the importance of thinking beyond the current conceptual boundaries of the Indo-Pacific. It has been far more proactive in including the African continent (the western-most part of the Indo-Pacific) in global initiatives such as the BRI, even though the continent was hardly mentioned in original conceptions of the initiative around 2013. Meanwhile, Quad members are yet to collectively include Africa in their own Indo-Pacific strategies. This has earned China support for the BRI in Africa, being perceived as a partner that creates policy

‘with’ rather than ‘for’ others. Similarly, China’s support for certain Indo-Pacific strategies and the matching of interests, provides it with an opportunity to help shape the future of the concept itself. Notably, China’s vision is also impacted. The year 2023 will mark the ten-year anniversary of the BRI, yet its future remains uncertain given that analysts note that Chinese officials are increasingly promoting the Global Development Initiative – proposed during Xi’s September 2021 speech at the UN General Assembly – in place of the BRI. It is described as a repurposed version of the BRI that emphasises sustainability and quality<sup>5</sup> (Brînză 2022). This article has thus reflected China’s flexible approach towards both the Indo-Pacific as well its own BRI, where others’ responses and strategies, and changing contexts have also shaped its approaches.

## 4. Conclusion

This article has outlined China’s view of the Indo-Pacific within the context of competitive strategic narratives framing and functioning in a mega-region encompassing the Pacific and Indian Oceans.

China was initially largely opposed to the idea of the Indo-Pacific as a set of strategies, perceived to be largely driven by the US. However, it has adapted its response to somewhat supportive, particularly with regards to the strategies of specific partners, such as ASEAN. This reflects China’s complex engagement with the liberal international order where it challenges it in some respects, and supports it in others, to further its interests.

We explain China’s change in stance, in part, by strategic narratives that are central to the construction of the logic of a new international (and regional) order. The Indian Ocean – and the Western Indian Ocean in particular – has been the equivalent of a blank spot on the strategic map, largely overlooked. This has changed as emerging powers, coupled to great power competition, have sought to project power in the region. Strategic narratives around the Indo-Pacific represent the articulation of foreign policies, and great powers to build a sustainable collective consensus on possible new and competing orders.

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5 Amid accusations of poor quality and standards, ecological impact and issues with loan repayments.

Furthermore, while China retreated from outright rejection of the concept and shows its support for some Indo-Pacific strategies, it also challenges the current order in two ways:

First is its physical presence through its BRI that overlays its own interpretation on the Indo-Pacific region. Yet its initiative builds on existing relations with and its inclusion of the western part of the region that is, African partner states. Moreover, the BRI engagement in Africa has been characterised as economic- and development-focussed over geopolitics, and similar to China's support for certain Indo-Pacific outlooks, there is support for African partners' aspirations and outlooks. This would likely continue, even if the BRI were to morph into considering the introduction of a new initiative, the GDI.

Second, while China appears as an anomaly to the discussion on the Indo-Pacific, a concept partly promoted in response to its rise in this mega-region, it has a significant role in shaping the future meaning and understanding of it. This is because there is no single interpretation of what constitutes the Indo-Pacific and its physical parameters. China could impact future understanding of the Indo-Pacific in the following ways: firstly, China's own physical and deepening role in this greater region (also exemplified by its BRI engagement in Africa), secondly, the fact that alliances in this space seem to be continually shifting and changing (some contingent on China's own stance on issues) and thirdly, China's amenable approach in co-constituting initiatives that meet both its interests and those of its partners.

For China, the significance of strategic narratives to foreign policy led the CCP to adopt a specific approach based on 'discourse power.' While China has been able to utilise its formidable capacity to promote its national interests through the promulgation of meta-narratives such as the BRI across the region, the dynamics of systemic change and the response of other state actors underscore the degree to which Beijing is still unable to set the agenda on matters like the Indo-Pacific. These tactical moves and even strategic shifts on the Indo-Pacific and BRI make clear that China is both shaping and being shaped by the discourse around the Indo-Pacific.

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