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Asia in 2023: Navigating the US-China rivalry

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Filippo Boni
Diego Maiorano

viella

A large, intricate mandala graphic is positioned on the right side of the cover, extending from the middle to the bottom. It features concentric circles of geometric and floral patterns, rendered in a lighter shade of green against the dark green background.

CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

ASIA MAIOR

The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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SPECIAL ARTICLE

THE RETURN OF THE 'INDO-PACIFIC'

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This article studies the Indo-Pacific, the warm waters surrounding Asia as a concept in geography in the later part of the 19th century. It shows how the concept was re-fashioned in geopolitical and geocultural commentary in the earlier part of the 20th century, and then rediscovered in explicit geopolitical and geoeconomics terms in the 21st century. The economic weight of the Indo-Pacific makes trade routes and, with it, sea-lane maritime security and control an issue of prominence. As such, this sense of the Indo-Pacific is increasingly shaping strategies and policies for the region. The impact of China has generated much of the current Indo-Pacific discourse, strategies and policies; as has the rise of India.

KEYWORDS – Indo-Pacific; geopolitics; geo-economics; geo-culture; maritime Asia

1. Introduction

India's External Affairs Minister, addressing the newly set-up Indo-Pacific Business Summit in 2021, invoked history, «the Indo-Pacific represents a return of history. A seamless and integrated space was disconnected decades ago by the strategy of the day» [Jaishankar 2021]. The seamless and integrated space was the Indian and (Western) Pacific Oceans, the warm waters around Asia, the Indo-Pacific.

During the last decade, there has been an accelerating and widespread focus on the Indo-Pacific by states and regional actors inside and outside the region. The «Indo-Pacific» arose as a geographical term in the 19th century, was pushed as geopolitical term in the early 20th century, and was then rediscovered in the 21st century as a formal geo-strategic term shaping policies.

2. 1850-onwards: geographic usage

James Logan seems the earliest to have used the «Indo-Pacific» label in 1850 as an ethnological term in connection with «the continental relations of the

Indo-Pacific islanders» the various Malayo-Polynesian (i.e. Austronesian) languages to be found from Polynesia through Southeast Asia to Madagascar around «the shores and islands of the Indo-Pacific Ocean» [Logan 1850: 252, 273].

The Indo-Pacific term moved from ethnology to marine biology by the late 19th century, as in the *Report on the Zoological Collections made in the «Indo-Pacific Ocean» Carried out by HMS Alert in 1881-1882* [British Museum 1884]. Such zoological expeditions were for scientific as well as national purposes. They came complete with finding and labelling local species like the Indo-Pacific Bottlenose Dolphin, in the waters spreading from the West Pacific to East Africa.

This Indo-Pacific tagging crossed into climatology, exemplified with the Indo-Pacific Monsoon Climate Zone, otherwise known as the Indo-Pacific Tropical Rain Belt, encompassing the Pacific and Indian Oceans. The Indo-Pacific Warm Pool is further uncontroversial labelling. Oceanology has adopted Indo-Pacific frames of reference, for example the Indo-Pacific Convergence Region with regard to plate tectonics on the floors of the Indian and Pacific oceans.

3. 1900-1945: *Classic Geopolitics and Geo-culture*

The US push across the Pacific in 1899, from Hawaii to Guam and the Philippines, was heavily influenced by the maritime geopolitics advocated by Alfred Mahan. His advocacy of US expansion westwards across the Pacific was in part responding to a perceived threat of China «bursting her barriers eastward toward the Pacific» [Mahan 1898: 32]. Mahan's 1900 publication *The Problem of Asia: Its Effect upon International Politics* focussed on the land-power challenge of Russia; but also the advantages of seapower deployments from British India around the Indian Ocean, through South-East Asia to China [Mahan 1900: 27-29].

Eurasian land power considerations were picked up by Halford Mackinder in his 1904 paper 'The Geographical Pivot of History', where he argued that the Eurasian «Heartland», essentially Central Asia, was as a pivot of history from which power had been deployed. Mackinder concluded by going from a Russian threat in his 1904 present to a potential Chinese threat in the future, where «they might constitute the yellow peril to the world's freedom just because they [China] would add an oceanic frontage to the resources of the great continent» [Mackinder 1904: 437].

Geopolitics was to the fore in Germany with the *Indopazifischen Raum* («Indo-Pacific realm») propounded by Karl Haushofer during the 1920s and 1930s [Li 2022]. In the «Great Indo-Pacific Ocean», it was the maritime interplay of India, China and Japan, «this unity of the monsoon countries», which caught his attention [Haushofer 1938: 17, 355]. He reckoned «those

spacious, population-hungry regions of the future have their spatial point of gravity on the Indo-Pacific sea space» [Haushofer 1938: 110]. In the opposite direction, he noted that the US «stands across the Pacific with an armoured foot on the Americas and East Asia corresponding to the wide, and then again, narrow, sea-strategic concept which was conceived by Mahan» [Haushofer 1938: 184].

Haushofer's geopolitics found a sympathetic audience in Japan during the 1930s, with his call for a Germany-Japan alliance echoed in the Anti-Comintern Pact signed in 1936 [Spang 2006]. In turn, Japan's Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere – which covered Oceania, the Pacific Rim littorals of Korea and East China, and Southeast East Asia – would have become a Japanese Indo-Pacific if Japan's advance on British India had been successful in 1940.

In contrast, the Indian historian Kalidas Nag outlined the Indo-Pacific in geocultural rather than geopolitical terms. During the 1920s Nag accompanied Rabindranath Tagore on tours of the Western Pacific and South East Asia, both figures espousing Pan-Asianism. On his return, Nag founded the Greater India Society in 1926, its first *Bulletin* containing his piece 'Greater India', which drew out cultural links running from India to the Pacific [Zabarskaitė 2023]. By the time of Nag's stay at the University of Hawaii in 1937, he was characterising the «vast expanse of water extending from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific» as «the Indo-Pacific domain» [Nag 1937: 37]. Even as Japan was coming westwards to the doors of India, trying to bring it within its Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, Nag, in his *India and the Pacific World* Nag extolled the «Indo-Pacific domain which is the true historical setting and geographical background of Greater India» [Nag 1941: 282].

4. 1945-1990s. *De Facto Indo-Pacific Frameworks*

The Second World War may have brought an eclipse of Haushofer's Indo-Pacific geopolitics centred around a Japanese-led order; but allied victory, mainly due to US might, saw an extension of Mahanian seapower geopolitics. US occupation of Japan and its West Pacific island possessions (Ryukyus, Bonins, Marianas and Carolines), alongside US possessions of Hawaii, West Samoa, Guam and the Philippines left the Pacific as very much an «American Lake» [Lattimore 1945], right up to the Asian mainland.

Nicholas Spykman had already argued that the US «will have to establish island bases for their power [...] such bases will probably be sufficient to counterbalance any future attempt of China to dominate the Far East» [Spykman 1944: 53]. China's shadow loomed ever larger when the Chinese mainland (but not Taiwan) fell to Mao Zedong's Communist Party, the People's Republic of China being proclaimed in October 1949. In March 1949, as the mainland was slipping away, Douglas MacArthur judged that «now

the Pacific has become an Anglo-Saxon lake and our line of defense runs through the chain of islands fringing the coast of Asia» [MacArthur 1949]. It was a chain considered as running from the Philippines (through Taiwan) and the Ryukyu Islands to Japan and over to Alaska's Aleutian Islands. In January 1950, Dean Acheson's speech to the National Press Club dubbed the offshore island chains as the US forward «defense perimeter» [Acheson 1969: 357] enclosing an essentially American Pacific.

In contrast, the Indian Ocean which had been something of a «British Lake» during the 19th century, based on UK control of routes to and from India, was transformed by the end of the UK rule in the Indian Sub-continent in 1949, and the subsequent UK announcement in 1966 of its withdrawal from an East of Suez posture in terms of bases, most significantly at Singapore. UK Defence Secretary Denis Healey was blunt, admitting that this withdrawal would be «leading to the diminution or disappearance of our role in the Indo-Pacific thereafter» [Government of the UK 1966]. The US filled the gap to some extent by setting up a large base at Diego Garcia in 1971, with the agreement of the sovereign host the UK, in the newly formed British Indian Ocean Territory.

Cold War rivalry between the US and the Soviet Union was evident in the Pacific and Indian Oceans. One *de facto* Indo-Pacific framework was the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), set up in September 1954. This can be viewed through two lenses. Firstly, the United States was setting up NATO, CENTO, and SEATO for similar purposes of containment of the Soviet Union, which reflected Spykman's geopolitical logic of mobilizing the Eurasian «Rimland» against power projection from the Eurasian landmass. This Rimland «conflict area» [Spykman 1944: 54] stretched from Japan to the Mediterranean, and was an Indo-Pacific zone that post-1945 was seen as under threat from a Soviet Eurasian bloc. Secondly, SEATO can be seen through a narrower lens of China containment. The collapse of French power in Vietnam, as well as Beijing's intervention in the Korean War, was already bringing to the fore the spectre of Chinese control, in effect foreshadowing the formulation of the Domino Theory that led to US (and Australian) intervention in Vietnam during the 1960s. Here, Spykman's Rimland alliances, manifested in SEATO, was complemented by US alliance in East Asia with Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan (where Chiang Kai-shek's Republic of China had survived).

SEATO's membership was curiously sparse for South-East Asia, but stretched across the Indian and Pacific Oceans and included Pakistan, Thailand, Australia, New Zealand, Philippines, France, the UK and the US. Members had little common aims, with Pakistan seeking to gather support against India rather than to contain the Soviet Union or China. By 1968 the question was being asked: «Is SEATO obsolete?» [Miller 1968]. In 1977 a moribund SEATO was formally wound up, with Pakistan already establishing an ever-closer security partnership with China.

The US attempt to fight a land war in Vietnam ultimately failed. Consequently, the Nixon Doctrine announced in July 1969 indicated a US pullback from mainland involvement, a doctrine announced appropriately enough at Guam, the US «forward spear» then and now for projecting US power across the Pacific onto the Asian littoral. This «Guam Doctrine» represented a return to the «forward defence perimeter» advocated two decades earlier by MacArthur and Acheson and running along the offshore island chains [Girling 1970].

With a maritime focus, the US Pacific Command (PACOM), established in 1947, expanded its field of operations. In 1971, PACOM assumed responsibility for the Indian Ocean and the countries of southern Asia extending westward to the eastern border of Iran. PACOM's operational boundaries were changed yet again in 1976, as the US Pacific Command was given responsibility for the entire Indian Ocean to the east coast of Africa, including the Gulf of Aden, the Arabian Sea, and all the Indian Ocean Islands excepting Madagascar. This represented a *de facto* Indo-Pacific maritime command in the broadest geographic sense.

Talk of the «Pacific Century» [McCord 1991], an impending «Pacific Era» [Nagai 1987], the «Pacific Impulse» [Mahbubani 1995] became widespread by the 1990s. Around the Pacific, the post-war economic rise of Japan, followed by those of the «Tigers» of Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan and South Korea, coupled with the rise of California, brought about a new phase of economic vitality. A so-called *Rimspeak* [Cumings 1994], focussed on the Pacific Rim rather than the Pacific Basin, was institutionalised through the formation of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in 1989. This brought together North America (the US, Canada) with East Asia (Japan and South Korea), Southeast Asia (ASEAN, but not Myanmar) and Australasia (Australia and New Zealand). Further expansion took place in the 1990s, a rapidly modernising China as well as Taiwan in 1991, Mexico and Papua New Guinea in 1993, Chile in 1994, and Russia in 1998. The new regional coinage of «Asia Pacific» [Dirlik 1992] represented both littorals of the Pacific, i.e. «Pacific Asia» [Borthwick 1992] plus the Americas. Although India expressed some interest in 1991 in APEC membership, a moratorium on new members imposed from 1998-2012 and continuing concerns over India's protectionism kept India out of APEC.

Mikhail Gorbachev's speech at Vladivostok in July 1986 on 'Peace and Security for the Asia-Pacific Ocean Region' represented an attempt for the Soviet Union to take advantage of the economic vitality opening up in the region [Gorbachev 1986]. The sudden collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 left instead a diminished Russia, with the Russian Far East impoverished and the former Soviet Pacific Fleet, at times literally, rusting away.

In contrast, the very strength of the China surge, evident in the late 1990s, ironically meant that, as the 21st century approached, there was less talk of it being shaped by the Pacific [Foot and Walter 1999]. Instead, there

was increasing talk of the coming 21st century being shaped by China's economic rise. This was typified by books like *China's Century: The Awakening of the Next Economic Powerhouse* [Brahm 2001].

5. 2000s: Unofficial «Indo-Pacific» rediscovery

China's evident economic and military rise, evident from the 1980s, coupled with India's later economic take off in the 1990s saw the «Indo-Pacific» re-emerge in prominent usage, initially among commentators and think tanks.

This was first indicated in 2002 by a member of Canada's defence establishment James Boutillier, based at Vancouver on the Pacific shoreline, who drew out the geopolitics of the situation with his prescient piece on «some truly historic changes in the Indo-Pacific naval environment» being posed by «Japan's first long-range naval deployment since World War II» into the Indian Ocean, together with «the emergence of a new and more powerful Chinese navy and the re-emergence of an Indian navy with blue water ambitions» [Boutillier 2002-2003: 198]. His call was for Canadian «naval intervention and engagement in the Indo-Pacific Region» [Boutillier 2003: 209]. The related geo-economics of the situation were to the fore in his 'Reflections on the New Indo-Pacific Maritime and Naval Environment', where he argued that «the centre of world economic gravity has shifted from the Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific region», in which energy security and maritime security were entwined as «the Indian and Pacific Oceans are linked by vital energy flows and the overlapping geo-strategic interests of the Indian and Chinese navies» [Boutillier 2004: 1, 9].

Such Indo-Pacific language was re-echoed in 2005 by New Zealand's former naval commander Peter Cozens, who wrote in the inaugural edition of *Maritime Affairs*, published in India by the National Maritime Foundation, about the «Indo-Pacific» as a maritime-strategic continuum encompassing the Northern Indian Ocean, South-east Asia and Western/Central Pacific [Cozens 2005]. Also, in 2005, the Australian journalist Michael Richardson discussed the newly set up East Asia Summit (EAS) as a core for an «Indo-Pacific community» [Richardson 2005]. Like APEC, the EAS involved the East Asian powers of Japan, South Korea and China, alongside the ASEAN states, as well as Australia and New Zealand. Unlike APEC, the EAS also involved India from the onset. Russia and the USA joined in 2011, giving the EAS a Hollywood to Bollywood span. Nonetheless, the EAS had little institutional powers, and was unable to bridge China-US or China-India divisions.

A Track-II event, the Indo-Japan Dialogue on Ocean Security in 2006, between India's Society for Indian Ocean Studies (SIOS) and Japan's Ocean Policy Research Foundation, brought further Indo-Pacific input from Indian commentators. At the Dialogue, Premvir Das, the former Commander-in-Chief of India's Eastern Naval Command, used the term «Indo-Pacif-

ic» [Das 2006: 111, 115]. The following year, another naval figure, Gurpreet Khurana employed the term «Indo-Pacific» with regard to trade flows and sea lines of communication and the prospects for India-Japan cooperation [Khurana 2007: 139, 141, 144]. Raja Mohan proved a sustained Indo-Pacific advocate in India from 2011 onwards with his talk of the «new era of the Indo-Pacific» [Mohan 2011, 25 January].

An important contribution was made in 2007 in Australia where, in an open letter to the incoming Prime Minister Kevin Rudd about Australia-India relations, Rory Medcalf, based at the Lowy Institute, quoted «the Asia-Pacific (or some might say Indo-Pacific)» [Medcalf 2007]. This was the start of Medcalf's sustained and influential role as an advocate of the Indo-Pacific in Australia and beyond.

2007 was an important year in the dissemination of Indo-Pacific frames of reference, as it witnessed Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's address to the Indian Parliament in August 2007 on «Confluence of the Two Seas» about a maritime «broader Asia» [Abe 2007]. His call for closer India-Japan cooperation represented implicit strategic balancing, with China in mind; and was implemented in the wider setting up of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or QUAD, launching the co-operation between Australia, India, Japan and the United States. Officials first met in May 2007, with naval exercises held in the Bay of Bengal in September 2007. However, Chinese complaints brought this particular quadrilateral format to a halt in 2008.

6. 2010s-2023: Official Indo-Pacific rediscovery

Although China dismissed talk of the Indo-Pacific as insubstantial «foam» [Wang 2015], the 2010s witnessed increasing adoption of Indo-Pacific rhetoric by states, often concerned about China, which was translated into formal strategies, policies and outlook statements. By 2019, Japan's ambassador to India noted «the Indo-Pacific has become a buzzword now» [Kiramatsu 2019]. In 2021 India's ambassador to Japan similarly considered «the Indo-Pacific has become the new currency» for regional discourse, strategic narrative and policy implementation [Verma 2021].

The US started using Indo-Pacific rhetoric with Hillary Clinton, US Secretary of State during the first Obama administration of 2009-2013. Clinton used the term «Indo-Pacific» in 2010 to reflect closer naval cooperation with India. In her words, «we are expanding our work with the Indian navy in the Pacific, because we understand how important the Indo-Pacific basin is» [Clinton 2010]. Strategic rethinking around Indo-Pacific regional conceptualization generated practical imperatives in Clinton's mind, finalized to «translate the growing connection between the Indian and Pacific oceans into an operational concept» [Clinton 2011]. Alliance dynamics

were apparent. Whereas US relations with Australia had previously been described and conducted within an «Asia-Pacific» framework, Clinton extended this with Indo-Pacific references. As she noted, «we are also expanding our alliance with Australia from a Pacific partnership to an Indo-Pacific one» [Clinton 2011]. Finally, the following year, in a speech on economic statecraft, Clinton summarised that «the Indo-Pacific region is crucial to our future» [Clinton 2012].

Generally, the US policy pursued by Obama involved a «pivot» or «rebalance» westwards to Pacific Asia [Obama 2011]. However, while the mooted rebalance of military forces to Guam [Toroad 2012], Singapore, and Australia was put in train, and bilateral links with India deepened, the Indo-Pacific Economic Corridor (IPEC), mooted in 2014 to knit South Asia and South-East Asia, remained little funded or implemented by the US during the second Obama administration of 2013-2017.

Stephen Smith shows the exact moment when Australia started using Indo-Pacific frames of reference. As Minister for Foreign Affairs from 2007 to 2010, Smith generally used «Asia-Pacific» frames of reference, with a traditional focus on the Pacific and South-east Asia. However, as Defence Minister from 2010 to 2013, Smith started to apply specific and explicitly wider «Indo-Pacific» terminology to bring India and the Indian Ocean into defence discussions in general and maritime-naval aspects in particular. He first indicated in December 2011 that «the notion of the Indo-Pacific as a substantial strategic concept is starting to gain traction» [Smith 2011]. Medcalf argued from the sidelines that the Indo-Pacific was «a term whose time has come» [Medcalf, 2012]. Whereas Australia's 2009 Defence White Paper mentioned the Asia-Pacific 47 times and the Indo-Pacific zero times, the 2013 Defense White Paper contained a meagre three mentions of the Asia-Pacific swamped by 67 mentions of the Indo-Pacific, where «a new Indo-Pacific strategic arc is beginning to emerge, connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans» [Government of Australia 2013: 2]. This maritime «strategic arc» bent around but did not include China, running from Japan to India, significant balancing partners for Australia alongside the US.

India's first official references to the Indo-Pacific were also made in 2011. Shyam Saran penned an influential piece 'Mapping the Indo-Pacific' in October 2011 [Saran 2011, 29 October]. India's Prime Minister Manmohan Singh deployed the term «Indo-Pacific» for the first time in December 2012 at the India-ASEAN Commemorative Summit. These references knitted together India's «Look East» policy of economic outreach to South East Asia – announced in the mid-1990s, and expanded to Australasia and the Far East in a Look East-2 economic and security policy announced in 2003 – to India's long-established Look South drive for pre-eminence in the Indian Ocean.

The advent of Narendra Modi in 2014 brought a new urgency, with «Look East» re-badged as «Act East». An «Act Further East» policy was announced in September 2019, involving the Russian Far East and a Vladiv-

ostok-Chennai Maritime Corridor. On the economic front, India launched an Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) with Japan in May 2017. The Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) announced by Modi at the 14th East Asia Summit in November 2019 emphasised economic and environmental co-operation, but avoided any security issues. Neither the AAGC nor the IPOI involved China.

On the security front, India moved to stronger security ties with Japan and the United States, the India-Japan-US (IJUS) trilateral operating since 2011; though shading their terminology by calling for a «Free Open and Inclusive Indo-Pacific» (FOIP) at the East Asia Summit in 2018. The marked downturn in China-India relations in the wake of border clashes at Doklam in 2017 and Galwan in 2020 accelerated Indian security participation alongside the US, Japan and Australia in the QUAD, reformed in 2017. India also pursued closer security partnerships with Indonesia, Vietnam and France – all conducted under specific Indo-Pacific rhetoric on norms. Growing Indian concerns about China rendered the Russia-India-China (RIC) trilateral, running since the late 1990s, increasingly irrelevant under Modi's tenure. India's *Milan* naval exercises attracted an increasing range of actors across the Indo-Pacific, but with China not invited.

Although China avoided using the term Indo-Pacific, its own policies, to which other countries were responding, were very much Indo-Pacific in nature. On the military front, the 2000s saw the arrival of China's «Two Oceans» naval doctrine [Kaplan 2009], covering the Indian and Pacific Oceans [Lee 2002], reflecting a progression from «near-seas active defense» (*jinhai jujū fangyu*) in the 1980s to «far-seas operations» (*yuanghai zuo-zhan*) strategy. This quickly generated rising concerns over Chinese bases and facilities being established by China across the South China Sea and Indian Ocean, encapsulated in the «string of pearls» doctrine advanced in 2004, and subsequently reflected through Chinese presence at Kyaukpyu (Myanmar), Hambantota (Sri Lanka), Gwadar (Pakistan) and Djibouti (north-east coast of the Horn of Africa)). China's leader, Xi Jinping, outlined the Maritime Silk Road (MSR) infrastructure initiative in September 2013. In Xi's vision, the MSR extended from South China eastwards to the Pacific Basin and westwards around South-East Asia and across the Indian Ocean, over to the Mediterranean.

Shinzo Abe's return to power in Japan in 2012 renewed the Indo-Pacific pushback against China. Abe immediately made the call for a «security diamond» uniting Australia, India, Japan and the US [Abe 2012]. He went on to formulate the need for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) in 2016 as a central and enduring plank for Japanese foreign policy. This FOIP emphasis was pursued with further vigour by Fumio Kishida, Abe's Foreign Secretary from 2012-2017, who took over as Prime Minister in 2021.

Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific formulation was picked up by the Trump administration in 2017, and elaborated in the *US Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific* (security-focussed on combating China) in February 2018

and the State Department's *Advancing a Free and Open Indo-Pacific* (more diplomatically-nuanced) in July 2018. PACOM was renamed INDOPACOM in May 2018, reflecting its operational domain stretching from Hawaii to India and Diego Garcia. The subsequent Biden administration strongly reiterated this Free and Open Indo-Pacific usage, perhaps with more finesse on soothing partners. While Trump's decision to immediately withdraw from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (negotiated by Obama) was not reversed by the Biden administration, they did launch Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) negotiations in 2022, not inviting China, and leading to the Supply Chain Agreement signed in November 2023.

France moved towards an Indo-Pacific posture after 2018. Its interest for the area was based on the perception that France already was a «resident power» because of its possessions of Reunion in the Indian Ocean, and New Caledonia and Polynesia in the Pacific. The French Ministry of Defence issued an authoritative profile *France and Security in the Indo-Pacific* in June 2018 and *France's Defence Strategy in the Indo-Pacific* in May 2019. During President Macron's trip to Australia and New Caledonia in 2018, he advanced the notion of an «Indo-Pacific axis» (*l'axe Indo-Pacifique*) with Australia and India – a format reflected in the Australia-France-India trilateral set up in September 2020. French diplomats argued that «France will operate in concert with India to ensure a free open and secure Indo-Pacific» [Lenain 2019, 8 December]. Closer strategic partnerships were also established with Japan, Indonesia, Vietnam and the Philippines. Annual deployment involving French aircraft carrier (*Operation Clemenceau*) and helicopter carrier (*Operation Perouse*) groups were initiated across the Indian Ocean and Pacific from 2018 onwards. These involved various military exercises with US, Indian, Australian and Japanese units in the Indian Ocean and Western Pacific. They also included Freedom of Navigation exercises in the South China Sea and transit of the Taiwan Strait.

Other local middle-power actors moved to use Indo-Pacific openings. Vietnam's President argued that increased strategic cooperation between Vietnam and India would help «transform the Asia Century into the Indo-Asia-Pacific Century» [Quang 2018]. His state visit to India witnessed the signing of a formal Joint Statement emphasising the importance of the «Indo-Pacific», as well as the importance of maintaining freedom of navigation and over-flight in the South China Sea. Vietnam's 2019 White Paper on Defence announced that Vietnam was ready to participate in «security and defence mechanisms in the Indo-Pacific region» [Government of Vietnam 2019: 29]. This was in line with Hanoi's interests, which were immediately identified as maintaining Vietnam's position and claims in the South China Sea – identified by Hanoi as Vietnam's «East Sea» – against China. Long-running security ties with India were consequently strengthened, including Vietnam's participation from 2018 onwards in India's biannual *Milan* naval exercises in the Bay of Bengal. Likewise delicately and carefully

calibrated strategic cooperation was established with the Philippines, Japan, Australia, France, the UK and the US.

Indonesia, like Australia, looks onto the Indian and Pacific Oceans, a setting reflected in President Jokowi's concept of Indonesia being a «maritime nexus» between the two oceans. The previous Indonesian administration had already floated an Indo-Pacific Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation [Natalegawa 2013, 20 May], which, however, had been ignored by the various Powers. Jokowi's administration then worked on an Indo-Pacific Cooperation Programme during 2018 [Marsudi 2019, 20 March]. This was eventually adopted by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in their *ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific*, released in June 2019.

The *ASEAN Outlook* called for «ASEAN-Centrality» in Indo-Pacific cooperation and that the East Asia Summit should be «ASEAN-led» [ASEAN 2019]. However, it had little to say on security matters, and avoided grappling with China and South China Sea issues. It stressed economic cooperation, but without reference to rival economic schemes. In a similar fashion, the Indian Ocean Regional Association (IORA) released its own *Indo-Pacific Outlook* in November 2022. Like the *ASEAN Outlook*, the IORA counterpart advanced the need for local economic and environmental cooperation but had nothing to say on security issues. IORA also has even less convening power than ASEAN.

Bangladesh's *Indo-Pacific Outlook*, released in April 2023, welcomed both the ASEAN and IORA economic cooperation proposals and India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI), but avoided committing to either China's MSR or US-Japan FOIP proposals.

An accelerating European adoption of Indo-Pacific frames of reference was noticeable in the 2020s. Post-BREXIT, the UK announced a «Tilt to the Indo-Pacific» in its *Integrated Strategic Review* of 2021 [Government of the UK 2021]. A return to an «East of Suez» posture of deployment of forces and upgrading of basing access had already been announced in 2016 [Johnson 2016]. Naval chiefs adopted explicit Indo-Pacific language [Jones 2019]. Overlapping deployments from the UK were initiated from 2018 onwards, including the presence of an Aircraft Carrier Group in 2021, and ongoing long-term stationing in the region of HMS Tamar and HMS Spey was initiated in 2021. On the diplomatic front, in 2021 the UK became an ASEAN Dialogue Partner, as well as joining with Australia and the US in setting up AUKUS as a trilateral mechanism for defence cooperation. In 2022, the UK joined the maritime pillar of India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative, and signed a strong Defence Cooperation Agreement with Japan. Finally, in July 2023 the UK joined the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), and boycotted China's Belt and Road Forum in October 2023.

Elsewhere in Europe, Germany announced its *Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific* in September 2020, stressing the economic importance of the

region, and the necessity of a rules-based order, freedom of navigation and naval deployments [Government of Germany 2020]. Consequently, in 2021, the German frigate Bayern was sent exercising with India and Japan and was temporarily deployed across the South China Sea. In 2022, in a first-time event and largest peace time deployment, Germany sent 13 airforce fighters to participate in *Pitch Black* exercises in Australia.

A month after Germany, in October 2020, the Dutch government released *Indo-Pacific een leidraad voor versterking van de Nederlandse en EU samenwerking met-partners in Azië* («Indo-Pacific: A Guideline for Strengthening Dutch and EU Cooperation with Partners in Asia»). Like the UK and German strategy, the Dutch *Guideline* emphasised the economic allure of the Indo-Pacific, as well as the need to protect the rule of law and freedom of navigation, allocating a role for Dutch naval presence. This was manifested in the dispatch of the Dutch frigate, HNLMS Evertsen, embedded in the UK Carrier Strike Group, deployed in 2021.

At the European level, the formal *EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific* was released in 2021 and stressed economic engagement, and cooperation with like-minded partners to safeguard an international rules-based order. It specifically called for a greater presence of EU navies in Indo-Pacific waters. A further sign was the setting up of the annual Ministerial Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific mechanism in 2022, which brought together not only the EU and its member states, but also actors from around the Asian rimland (India and Japan) and from across the Pacific, (the US and Canada), together with the new CPTPP member, namely the UK, and the micro-island states in the Indian and Pacific Oceans (the Seychelles and Fiji). China was notably absent and notably uninvited. High Level Consultations on the Indo-Pacific, bringing together the EU with the US, were also initiated in 2022.

EU member-states with little, if any, historical links to the region also issued Indo-Pacific strategies. Czechia released Strategy for Cooperation with the Indo-Pacific in October 2022, and Lithuania released *For a Secure, Resilient and Prosperous Future. Lithuania's Indo-Pacific Strategy* in July 2023 [Government of Czechia 2022; Government of Lithuania 2023]. Both countries withdrew from the China-East Central European (CECE) mechanism, Lithuania in 2021 and Czechia in 2022, and established closer links with Taiwan, anathema to China.

Italy also pushed a more active Indo-Pacific outreach under the Meloni government, elected in October 2022. Italian interest in the Indo-Pacific was evident throughout 2023 [De Luca 2023, 2 January]. It was signalled during the year with Meloni's high profile appearance at the Raisina Dialogue [Meloni 2023], followed by the establishment of closer economic and security cooperation with India and Japan, and, to some degree, also with Vietnam and Indonesia. This was accompanied by the dispatch of the frigate Morosini on a six-month deployment across the Indo-Pacific. Converse-

ly, Italy moved away from China, boycotting China's Belt and Road Forum, held in September 2023 and formally withdrawing from China's Maritime Silk Road initiative at the end of the year.

The growth of Indo-Pacific formulations by Australia, India, Japan and the US, alongside their strengthening bilateral and trilateral relations, and mutual concerns about China, made the revival of the QUAD a particularly significant development in the late 2010s. First run at Senior Officials level in 2017, the re-established QUAD was upgraded to Ministerial Level in 2019 and Heads of Government summits in 2021. Annual four-way naval *Malabar* exercises commenced in 2020, which alternated between the Bay of Bengal and the Western Pacific. A QUAD Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Awareness was launched in 2022, as was a QUAD Infrastructure Coordination Group. 2023 witnessed the QUAD Supply Chain Agreement. QUAD-Plus formats co-opting South Korea and Canada made their appearance during the Covid pandemic in 2022. This was no surprise, given South Korea's and Canada's adoption of Indo-Pacific formulations in late 2022.

Canada's *Indo-Pacific Strategy*, released in November 2022, announced deeper involvement in the Indo-Pacific; including greater deployment of Canadian naval vessels (*Operation Projection*) in both the Indian and Pacific Oceans, and greater collaboration with other China-concerned actors. In such a vein, the *Sea Dragon* exercise in March 2023 involved the Canadian airforce exercising with India, Japan and the United States at Guam. Also, Canada joined India, South Korea and the United States in anti-submarine warfare exercises in April 2023. Very pointedly, HMCS Ottawa transited the Taiwan Strait in September 2023, along with USS Ralph Johnson, before conducting joint exercises with the Philippines and the US in the South China Sea in October 2023. This was followed by low-level military confrontation with China in November. However, Canadian relations with India took a dramatic downturn in late 2023, following Canadian accusations of Indian Intelligence Services assassinating Sikh «Khalistan» advocates in Canada [Hall 2024].

A final development in 2023 was South Korea's pursuit of Indo-Pacific security. An economic focus towards Southeast Asia and India through the New Southern Policy (NSP) was initiated by the Moon administration in November 2017. However, South Korea's *Strategy for a Free, Peaceful and Prosperous Indo-Pacific*, released on 28 December 2022, represented a much firmer security stand by President Yoon Suk Yeol, elected in May 2022. South Korea had already been reaching further out to India, but, under Yoon also struck a new minilateral pact with Japan and the US, self-defined as a «Trilateral Partnership for the Indo-Partnership [...] in pursuit of a free and open Indo-Pacific» [White House 2022]. Following their trilateral summit in Washington in August 2023, a ministerial-level Indo-Pacific Dialogue jointly inaugurated by Japan, South Korea and the US, with their first meeting arranged for January 2024.

7. Conclusion

This article started by invoking India's Minister for External Affairs Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, talking in 2021 of the Indo-Pacific as a welcome «return of history». In contrast, his Chinese counterpart Wang Ji invoked history in a very different fashion in 2021. He argued that «the so-called 'Indo-Pacific strategy', which is aimed at provoking bloc confrontation, is an attempt to form a small clique for geopolitical rivalry. It is the revival of the Cold-War mentality and regression of history. It should be swept into the dustbin» [Wang Yi 2021]. However, a dustbin does not await the Indo-Pacific. It remains a fact of life that China's own growing presence and assertiveness through the region, has been increasingly evident in the last decade. This, in itself, means that, in the near future, various Indo-Pacific responsive strategies will be generated by concerned actors inside and outside the region.

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