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Australia's embrace of the 'Indo-Pacific': new term, new region, new strategy?

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Abstract

This article argues that the 'Indo-Pacific' has become an increasingly influential term during the last few years within Australian strategic debate. Consequently, the article looks at how the concept of the 'Indo-Pacific' as a region is impacting on Australia's strategic discussions about regional identity, regional role, and foreign policy practices. The term has a strategic logic for Australia in shaping its military strategy and strategic partnerships. Here, the article finds that Australian usage of the term operates as an accurate description of an evolving 'region' to conduct strategy within, but also operates quite frequently (though not inevitably or inherently) as a more contested basis for China-balancing. The article looks closely at four themes: the Indo-Pacific as a term, the rhetoric (strategic debate) in Australia surrounding the Indo-Pacific term, the Indo-Pacific policy formulations by Australia, and the developing Indo-Pacific nature of bilateral and trilateral linkages between Australia, India, and the United States.

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A new ‘Indo–Pacific’ conception. Under such a conception, the western Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean to be considered as one strategic arc.—Australia in the Asian Century ([Government of Australia, 2012b](#), p. 74)

1 Introduction

This article looks at how the concept of the ‘Indo-Pacific’ as a region is impacting on Australia’s strategic discussions about regional identity, regional role, and foreign policy practices. If, as one Australian commentator put it, this is ‘the looming era of the Indo-Pacific’ ([Medcalf, 2012c](#)), then how is, could, and should Australia operate in an Indo-Pacific way in such an Indo-Pacific region and with other Indo-Pacific actors? The term ‘Indo-Pacific’ refers to the Indian Ocean and Pacific oceans in its broader sense; more narrowly (and meaningfully?) consisting of the East Indian Ocean and Western Pacific Ocean as interlinked waters with the South China Sea as a middle intervening stretch. In terms of regions, we can note the argument that ‘regions are, among other things, social constructions created through politics ... cognitive constructs that are rooted in political practice’ ([Katzenstein, 2002](#), p. 105). This article applies this through considering Australia’s construction of an Indo-Pacific frame of reference, and the political (policy, defense, and strategy) practices envisaged for it.

With those considerations in mind, this article argues quite simply that such an ‘Indo-Pacific’ concept, particularly in its narrower sense of the East Indian Ocean–South China Sea–Western Pacific Ocean continuum, has become an increasingly influential framework, a compelling strategic logic for Australia to shape its military strategy and strategic partnerships. It was no coincidence that within the space of three months at the end of 2012 and start of 2013, authoritative and deliberate government overviews, in the shape of the *Australia in the Asian Century* and the *National Security Strategy*, both devoted separate box subsections to defining and discussing the Indo-Pacific as a term for the government ([Government of Australia, 2012b](#), p. 740; [2013](#), p. 30). The article finds that Australian usage of the term operates as a description of an evolving region to conduct strategy within, but also operates quite frequently (though not inevitably or inherently) as a more debatable basis for China-balancing. The article looks closely at four themes: namely, the Indo-Pacific as a term, the rhetoric (strategic debate) in Australia surrounding the Indo-Pacific term, the Indo-Pacific policy formulations by

Australia, and the developing Indo-Pacific nature of bilateral and trilateral linkages between Australia, India, and the United States.

2 'Indo-Pacific' term

In January 2013, the official National Security Strategy document (*Strong and Secure – A Strategy for Australia's National Interest*) noted that while 'the Asia-Pacific has been Australia's primary strategic and economic frame of reference over recent decades ... the term "Indo-Pacific" has emerged more recently' (Government of Australia, 2013, p. 30). The term 'Indo-Pacific' moves from a geographical to a geopolitical framework through 'the idea of the "Indo-Pacific" as a mental map to propound emerging geopolitical realities' (Gnanagurunathan, 2012a). This is behind Michael Wesley's (2011b, p. 8) description of 'a new Indo-Pacific power highway ... just off Australia's northern coast'. Kim Beazley, the former leader of the Labor Party and Australia's ambassador to the United States, discussed the concept at various points in 2012. He argued for its general importance, the 'Indo-Pacific, [as a] centre of global power' (Beazley, 2012b) because of the great powers operating here, 'the Indo-Pacific region is a critical part of the global commons—with the United States, India and the China all active there' (Beazley, 2012a; also Medcalf *et al.*, 2012), and as such 'it is indisputable that the [Indo-Pacific] region exists as a practical, strategic reality that has to be addressed' (Beazley, 2012a) by Australia. It is noticeable that the term 'Indo-Pacific' has been increasingly deployed in a geopolitically charged way by both US and Indian figures in recent years, and with it increasing US-Indian maritime cooperation in Indo-Pacific waters (Scott, 2012). It is significant that Australia's role is also frequently mentioned by such figures; for example from Americans that 'Australia, should serve as the anchor for [Australia-US] security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific' (Auslin, 2010, p. 24), and from Indians that there is an emerging 'Indo-Pacific naval partnership' (Mohan, 2011b) between Australia and India.

Of course, one can ask whether the term 'Indo-Pacific' is more appropriate for Australia than the existing term 'Asia Pacific'? Do the two terms make any difference? They are not synonymous, though they overlap. The Australian government in its 2013 *National Security Strategy Review* argued that 'both terms can be used to define Australia's strategic setting ... use of the term "Indo-Pacific" complements the term

“Asia–Pacific”—they are both useful frames through which to view Australia’s national security interests’ ([Government of Australia, 2013](#), p. 30). This article argues that the term Indo-Pacific does indeed have some usefulness for considering Australia’s international relations (IR). The argument in this article is that the ‘Indo-Pacific’ is a term that brings in two themes that the term ‘Asia-Pacific’ does not. At geographic level, it brings in the Indian Ocean, and at state level it brings in India. Hence, the Australian government’s definition in its 2013 *National Security Strategy* that ‘the term “Indo–Pacific” ... captures the region spanning the Indian Ocean through to the western Pacific Ocean. “Indo-Pacific” emphasises the growing significance of this geographic corridor and of India’ (2013, p. 30). The former (bringing in the Indian Ocean) has maritime implications for highlighting a two-ocean sphere of operations for Australia. The latter (bringing in India) has strategic implications for bilateral state-to-state cooperation between Australia and India, and potential trilateral India–Australia–United States frameworks that have an Indo-Pacific nature to them, but also frequent China constraint undertones. Such undertones are, of course, controversial and have divided Australian commentators.

3 Indo-Pacific rhetoric

The term ‘Indo-Pacific’ has been picked up and indeed pushed with some enthusiasm by Australia in the past few years, though there have been some dissenting voices, but they have been in a minority. Quite simply, as the [Australian Senate \(2012, p. 6\)](#) Committee member Helen Kroger put it in October 2012, ‘now people want to talk about the Indo-Pacific region’. Gareth Evans illustrates this domestic politics development in the way Australians adjusted regional terminology. When he was the Minister for Foreign Affairs 1988–96, [Evans \(1996\)](#) stressed an ‘Asia-Pacific future’ for Australia to operate in; but he later moved to tell fellow Australians to ‘recognise’ that ‘the Asia Pacific is gradually becoming the Indo Pacific’ (2010; 2011a), that ‘the Euro-Atlantic is simply no longer the centre of the action. That mantle already belongs to the Asia Pacific ... – or what we should probably now be calling the “Indo Pacific”’ (2012).

Long coastlines in the east facing the Pacific and in the west facing the India Ocean generate ‘Australia’s unique geography as a continent bridging the Pacific and the Indian oceans ... for this country at least the

Indo-Pacific idea is here to stay' (Medcalf, 2012b). The question arising for Australia is how far this Indo-Pacific geographical location is reflected or should be reflected in an Indo-Pacific political strategy, and for what purposes? As one Australian academic put it to an Australian Senate Enquiry, what are 'Australia's strategic interests and challenges in the nascent Indo-Pacific age' (Phillips, 2012)? Here, geography merges into geopolitics for another Australian academic, in which 'Australia offers a huge, politically stable and reliable, as well as technically capable, bridge between the Indian Ocean and the western Pacific' (Gelber, 2012, p. 19), and also between India and the United States. This is the strategic logic in which the Indo-Pacific concept is exemplified by, but also facilitates, the emergence of a trilateral India–Australia–United States grouping.

Previously, Australia's mantra had been the 'Asia-Pacific' under Paul Keating's Labor Government of 1991–96, although with a tilt to Asia, and under John Howard's Liberal-National Government of 1996–2007, although with a tilt to the Pacific. However, the Labor Governments that took power in 2007, as headed by Kevin Rudd and then Julia Gillard, incorporated Indian Ocean considerations alongside the established Asia-Pacific Ocean frameworks. This was particularly so with government figures like Peter Varghese, and Stephen Smith. Consequently, the official use of the term 'Indo-Pacific' in connection with Australian policy formulation became noticeable by 2011–12; and was welcomed enthusiastically at the influential Lowy Institute by figures who talked of 'the irresistible rise of the Indo-Pacific' (Wesley, 2011a) and of 'a term whose time has come: the Indo-Pacific' (Medcalf, 2012f). The Conference on *Indo-Pacific Maritime Security in the 21st Century*, which was co-sponsored by the Lowy Institute and the US Naval War College, and which was held at the Royal Australian Navy Heritage Centre at Sydney in February 2011, gave a further push to the term.

Australia has embraced the term 'Indo-Pacific', in part because the term is seen as an accurate description of structural maritime trends taking place in Asia (the rise of India and China and their blue water navies) and remaining in force in the Pacific (US concentration of strength, and rebalance or 'pivot' back to the Pacific). This embrace was consequently also in the sense of Australia shaping its policies, disposition of forces, and strategic agreements in an Indo-Pacific logic.

As Prime Minister (2007–10), Kevin Rudd was instrumental in pushing forward economic links with China in the Asia-Pacific. However, as Minister for Foreign Affairs (2010–12) in the Gillard Government, Rudd incorporated Indian Ocean settings into Australian foreign policy settings. As a result, he argued that ‘we have long looked east across the Pacific to our long standing allies the United States ... equally now Australia must look west, to the great challenges and opportunities that now present themselves across the Indian Ocean region’ (Rudd, 2010). Consequently, he felt that in terms of ‘geo-strategic’ changes and challenges facing Australia, ‘I’m not just talking about the Pacific, or the Asia-Pacific. The critical region for our future now extends to include the Indian Ocean as well’ (Rudd, 2011). This is ‘critical geopolitics’ for a critical region, ‘position’ as aspirations, hopes and fear for Australia in its Indo-Pacific neighborhood.

The constructed sense of the Indo-Pacific term came out with comments from Australia’s then High Commissioner to India Peter Varghese (2012a):

Today, it makes more sense to think of the Indo-Pacific, rather than the Asia Pacific, as the crucible of Australian security. ... This new construct of the Indo-Pacific connects the Indian and Pacific Oceans, thereby underlining the crucial role that the maritime environment is likely to play in our future strategic and defence planning. The Indo-Pacific represents the centre of gravity of Australia’s economic and strategic interests.

His promotion in September 2012 to the post of Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) strengthened this government shift toward advocacy of the Indo-Pacific. One of his first comments at DFAT was that the East Asia Summit, where Australia sits alongside India, the United States, and China as well as other Asia-Pacific countries, is a framework ‘which can manage challenges for the Indo-Pacific’ (Varghese, 2012b). The following year, a lengthy profile of the Indo-Pacific concept was made:

Trade routes ... drawing links again between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. That is one reason why today it makes more sense to think of the Indo Pacific, rather than East Asia or even the Asia Pacific, as the crucible of Australian security. This broader definition returns India to Asia’s strategic matrix. It connects the Indian and Pacific Oceans,

thereby underlining the crucial role that the maritime environment is likely to play in our future strategic and defence planning. ... The Indo Pacific represents the centre of gravity of Australia's economic and strategic interests. It includes our top nine trading partners. It embraces our key strategic ally, the US, as well as our largest trading partner, China. It reinforces India's role as a strategic partner for Australia and it brings in the big Asian economies of Japan, Korea, Indonesia and Vietnam as well as the diplomatic and trade weight of ASEAN. (Varghese, 2013)

The role of geoeconomics and the role of India were the two importance features behind Varghese's pleas for a readjustment of strategic terminology.

A particular noticeable emphasis on an Indo-Pacific framework for Australia has come from Stephen Smith, Minister for Foreign Affairs 2007–10 and Minister for Defence 2010 onwards. In his first speech as Minister for Foreign Affairs, he highlighted his own regional roots, as Member of Parliament for Perth: 'I look at the world from a Western Australian perspective ... for the future. ... Western Australia looks naturally to the Indian Ocean. When the sun sets in the West, it sets on the Indian Ocean, not the Pacific' (Smith, 2007). Here, Medcalf (2012e) argued in the wake of the Australia–US Ministerial Consultation (AUSMIN) at Perth in 2012, which brought together the Foreign and Defence Ministers from both countries, that Perth and West Australia in general was particularly suited to become a 'hub of the Indo-Pacific Age'.

A recurring theme of complementing Australia's Pacific orientation with an Indian Ocean orientation constantly surfaced in Smith's period as Minister for Foreign Affairs:

Despite its importance, Australia has, regrettably, neglected the Indian Ocean region. ... We need to look west, as well as east. ... Australia is a country with significant Indian Ocean as well as Pacific interests. ... The presence of large and growing naval powers, as well as transnational security issues including piracy, requires that we put the Indian Ocean alongside the Pacific Ocean at the heart of our maritime strategy and defence planning. ... While Australia's foreign and trade policy focus has traditionally been oriented towards the Asia-Pacific, since it came to office the Government has established a more comprehensive approach that recognises the diverse regions of

the Indian Ocean rim and Australia's interests in closer Indian Ocean engagement. (Smith, 2010)

What is noticeable is that while Smith frequently talked of the need to complement a Pacific foreign policy with an Indian Ocean foreign policy, he did not actually use the term 'Indo-Pacific' during his time as Minister for Foreign Affairs from 2007 to 2010. However, by the time he moved to the Department of Defence in September 2010, the term had started to become regularly used by Indian, American, and increasing numbers of Australian commentators. As Defence Minister, Smith in turn applied specific and explicit Indo-Pacific terminology to defense issues in general and maritime-naval aspects in particular. This reflected but also furthered a process in which 'the notion of the Indo-Pacific as a substantial strategic concept is starting to gain traction' (Smith, 2011).

Indo-Pacific rhetoric was deployed at various times in 2012 by Smith, as with his sense of 'the importance of viewing our part of the world not just as the Asia Pacific, but also the Indo Pacific' (Smith, 2012e). Interestingly, he gave the Indo-Pacific concept a wider framework than just (China-centric?) security meaning: 'the Indo-Pacific not just with security implications but with enormous economic investment and prosperity' (Smith, 2012d). However, security considerations continued to be more often linked by Smith to the Indo-Pacific framework, perhaps not surprising as Smith was the Minister for Defence. Here, sometimes identical phrasing was produced, with his reiteration and reinforcement that 'in this century, the Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean Rim, what some now refer to as the Indo-Pacific, will become the world's strategic centre of gravity' (2012a,b,c). In that light, he was ready to tell the annual Asia-Pacific Chiefs of Defence Force Conference that 'the defence of Australia, security, stability and cohesion of our immediate neighbourhood and stability in the wider Indo-Pacific – it must now reflect the historic shift of strategic weight to the Indo Pacific' (Smith, 2012c). Such a process was one that he felt 'will drive Australia to ultimately put the Indian Ocean alongside the Pacific Ocean at the heart of our maritime strategic and defence planning' (2012b,c). Such planning would have to work around a situation where 'Australia's changing strategic circumstances' were those in which 'the Indo Pacific will be home to three super powers ... US, China and India will be the great strategic powers of our region' (Smith, 2012a).

The Australian military chiefs have embraced the Indo-Pacific concept. The Australian navy and its Chief of Navy welcomed this Indo-Pacific maritime rhetoric: 'a maritime outlook is simply essential for Australia to be effective in achieving its strategic goals. It has always been curious to those of us in Navy why we as a country tend to think of ourselves as Pacific nation and very rarely as an Indian Ocean one' (Griggs, 2012). As Chief of Navy, Griggs highlighted deliberate two-ocean Indo-Pacific deployments and operations: 'our frigates will continue to range across the Indo-Pacific providing presence, showing resolve, protecting trade, building stronger ties with regional navies' (Griggs, 2012). On this naval front, it is significant that Australia's membership of the West Pacific Naval Symposium set up by the United States in 1988 was supplemented by its membership of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium set up by India in 2008. General David Hurley, Chief of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) was clear about this process in March 2013: 'in recent months, we have been referring to what we call the "Indo-Pacific Strategic System," an area that we see as one strategic system' (Hurley, 2013). This he saw as one stretching 'from the east coast of Africa and the Persian Gulf to the Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific', in which 'particularly the trade routes, we are teasing out that idea in the White Paper and examining what it means in terms of expressing our strategic requirements and interests into the future' (Hurley, 2013).

4 Indo-Pacific policy formulations

Defense formulations for the ADF have also made a point of moving away from just a Pacific focus toward a two-ocean strategy, which involves both the Pacific and Indian Oceans. In the words of the ADF Chief, 'the Pacific and Indian Oceans are emerging as a single strategic system that is straddled by the South East Asian archipelago. This is our neighbourhood' (Hurley, 2012). This is the Indo-Pacific in other words.

The starting point for defense formulations is the *Defence White Paper 2009*. It defined defending Australia as the first priority; the 'second priority' was given as stability and security in the South Pacific; and the third priority was given as 'military contingencies in the Asia-Pacific region' (Government of Australia, 2009, p. 13). Although the Indian Ocean was given a lower strategic ranking than the South Pacific, it was flagged for the future:

The Indian Ocean will have an increasingly strategic role to play within the ADF's primary operational environment... Australian defence planning will have to contemplate operational concepts for operating in the Indian Ocean region, including with regional partners with whom we share similar strategic interests. (p. 52)

There was no time scale envisaged, though somewhat lengthy, whereby 'over the period to 2030, the Indian Ocean will join the Pacific Ocean in terms of its centrality to our maritime strategy and defence planning' (p. 37).

In the *Defence White Paper 2009*, Australia's own northern coastline and Indian Ocean island possessions were noted for their role in enabling a 'strong capability to project military power from mounting bases and forward operating bases in northern Australia and, if required, from strategically significant offshore territories, which have enduring defence value', in which 'our expansive strategic geography requires an expeditionary orientation on the part of the ADF at the operational level, underpinned by requisite force projection capabilities' ([Government of Australia, 2009](#), pp. 51–52). The development of hydrocarbon resources off Australia's northwest coast has been an immediate driver of the Indo-Pacific Region concept in Australia, with the ADF earmarked for defending these national assets. However, in the *Defence White Paper 2009*, the circumstances of wider ADF operations were veiled but China-centric. The section dealing with 'major power adversaries' was exemplified through the need 'to selectively project military power... in maritime Southeast Asia. The Government is confident that the weight and reach of the force that it intends to build will allow us to do this' (p. 64).

The ADF's 2012 *Posture Review* used the definition that 'Australia's primary operational environment... extends from the eastern Indian Ocean to the island states of Polynesia' ([Government of Australia, 2012a](#), p. 8) – the same formulae given in the *Defence White Paper 2009* ([Government of Australia, 2009](#), p. 51). However, in comparison with the *Defence White Paper 2009*, there was more treatment in the 2012 *Posture Review* to building up an Indian Ocean presence and within a shorter time scale, to reflect 'the prominence of the ADF and Navy presence in Western Australia; and the increasing importance of the Indian Ocean' ([Government of Australia, 2012a](#), p. 25).

The 2012 *Posture Review* made a point of emphasizing the need to strengthen Australia's Indian Ocean position alongside the already established Pacific positions. Australia's main West Coast base facing the India Ocean is being built up; 'Fleet Base West at HMAS *Stirling* is well-located for maritime operations in Australia's Western and Northern approaches' with 'capacity for AWDs [Air Warfare Destroyers] to be forward deployed from Fleet Base West, given its Indian Ocean location and proximity to Southeast Asia' (Government of Australia, 2012a, pp. 32–33). The port of Darwin remains a key point, which reflects the need to 'prioritise the ADF's ability to defend the North and its maritime approaches' (p. 18) in the Indo-Pacific. Darwin continues to generally host the multilateral *Kakadu* exercises, which include participants from Southeast Asia and the Western Pacific such as Japan. Darwin's naval infrastructure is being further strengthened: 'Darwin provides an important Northern base for refuelling Australian and visiting allied naval vessels. ... The new wharf would enable refuelling and logistics support for all current and planned future Navy ships, including the Navy's LHDs [Landing Helicopter Decks]' (p. 34).

A further sign of Australia's Indo-Pacific shift was the 2012 *Posture Review* highlighting of how 'the Cocos (Keeling) Islands have significant military strategic value as a staging location for maritime air patrol and surveillance activities, given their position in the Indian Ocean and close to Southeast Asia', leading to its recommendation to 'upgrade the Cocos (Keeling) Islands airfield facilities to support unrestricted P-8 and UAV [Unmanned Aerial Vehicle] operations' (Government of Australia, 2012a, p. 26). This all represents longer range reconnaissance over the Eastern Indian Ocean and westward into the South China Sea and Western Pacific, and reinforces 'Australian strategic importance in Indo-Pacific' (Luke, 2012) waters. Still further out, the 2012 *Posture Review* noted how 'Australia's access to the Royal Malaysian Air Force (ex-RAAF) Butterworth air base in Malaysia continues to support our maritime surveillance operations in maritime Southeast Asia and the eastern Indian Ocean' (Government of Australia, 2012a, p. 54).

Such Indo-Pacific settings were then picked up with explicit use of the Indo-Pacific term in the long-awaited 2012 White Paper *Australia in the Asian Century*. This reflective and definitive report pointed to 'a new "Indo-Pacific" conception' (Government of Australia, 2012b, p. 74), defined as the 'regional construct of the Indo-Pacific, linking the Indian

and Pacific oceans as one strategic arc' (p. 232). Interestingly, the traditional Asia-Pacific framework seemed to have slipped out of its formulations as it compared and juggled between how 'for Australia, either the Indo-Pacific or trans-Asian conceptions could shape, in different ways, our economic, political, security and environmental interests' (p. 74). Although the 2013 *National Security Strategy Review* focus remains predominantly on the Asia Pacific in terms of regions and the American alliance in terms of relationships, it considered the 'Indo-Pacific' as a useful 'complement' to the established Asia-Pacific term, 'with Australia increasingly considering its interests through this [particular Indo-Pacific] lens' (Government of Australia, 2013, p. 30). The 'ongoing strategic shift to our region, the Indo-Pacific' was seen by the Defence Minister as influencing Australian Defence considerations in the 2013 *Defence White Paper* (Smith, 2013; also Smith, 2012b).

5 Indo-Pacific bilateralism–trilateralism

In the light of such a build-up of Australian military assets and disposition, the question arises of whom such assets will be used with, and indeed whom they might be used against? As Wesley (2011a) argued at the Lowy Institute:

It no longer makes any sense to describe Australia's region as the Asia-Pacific. Australia must recognise that it lives in a new Indo-Pacific era ... of elaborate and overlaid geometrical patterns of alignment and enmity, enmeshment and balancing ... if military, financial and gravitational might form the skeleton of the Indo-Pacific order, it is countries' capabilities to establish and block coalitions and partnerships that will form the muscles, the moving parts, of the region.

The two features most strongly linked to Australia's Indo-Pacific debate are its strengthening bilateral links with India and the United States. These bilateral links operate and are manifested in the Indo-Pacific rather than just either the Indian Ocean or just the Pacific Ocean. Moreover, they generate the possibility of an Indo-Pacific trilateral framework linking Australia with India and the United States. This would complement the existing trilateral framework established between Australia, the United States, and Japan, as well as that established between India, the United States, and Japan.

With regard to India, Australian figures link India's general economic-driven regional and international rise to the Indo-Pacific concept; that 'with India's own size and rate of growth, it is not far-fetched to see that centre of gravity shifting further, within the foreseeable future, from the Asia Pacific to the Indo Pacific' (Evans, 2011b). Moreover, they note that India not only operates in the Indian Ocean but also through its *Look East Policy*, it operates in Southeast Asia and the Western Pacific. Medcalf (2013) argues that this emerging strategic partnership between Australia and India is the 'missing link in the security architecture of Indo-Pacific Asia.' The two countries have shared concerns about jihadist-piracy disruption of the Strait of Malacca, but also concerns about China's growing presence in the South China Sea and Indian Ocean. As Medcalf (2012a; also Gnanagurunathan 2012b, p. 2) argues, 'it is no secret that Australia and India have a common interest in understanding and managing the impact of a rising China on the Indo-Pacific strategic order.' Semi-official track 1.5 diplomacy had the sense that in 'their convergent strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific region ... Australia and India share strong interests in a stable multipolar regional order in Indo-Pacific Asia' (Australia-India Roundtable, 2012).

The Australian prime minister's visit to India in October 2012 brought high-level deployment of Indo-Pacific rhetoric. The two leaders expressed their common interest 'in the maintenance of stability and security through the Indian-Pacific region ... both also recognise the importance of the maritime theatre to our future security' (Australia-India, 2012). Gillard went on in her own right to stress that 'as open, democratic and pluralistic societies ... we see common security interests in what is increasingly described as the Indo-Pacific region. We both want security of maritime routes' (Gillard, 2012).

It is no surprise that Indo-Pacific rhetoric by Australia involves naval cooperation: 'India and Australia, with the two most significant and advanced navies of the Indian Ocean rim countries, are natural security partners in the Indo-Pacific region' (Smith, 2011; also Mohan, 2011a). At the official level, Australia already has carried out naval exercises with India in various quadrilateral (*Malabar 2007-2*) and multilateral (*Milan*) settings in the Indian Ocean. The Western Pacific beckons as a further arena for Australia-India maritime cooperation, although whether India gives Australia the same maritime weight as Australia gives India remains a moot point. Australia's general naval strengthening

and renewed focus on the Indian Ocean is of relevance for Indian perceptions.

Australia–United States links have been strong for over half a century. In recent years, it has not only been strengthened but it has been adjusted; in the words of US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (2011; also Medcalf, 2011), ‘expanding our alliance with Australia from a Pacific partnership to an Indo-Pacific one’. The Australian government supported this shift, ‘the US is not going away and is re-balancing towards the Indo-Pacific ... substantially enhanced practical cooperation between Australia and the US is an essential part of Australia’s contribution to regional peace and stability’ (Smith, 2012d). In turn, Hillary Clinton’s rhetoric in 2012 at the AUSMIN meeting held in Perth again incorporated Indo-Pacific rhetoric. It was a question for her of looking at the ‘Indo Pacific region for now and for the future ... routes that connect the Indian Ocean to the Pacific ... the Indo Pacific region is going to be critical to our future as well as yours’ with ‘a crucial strategic shift linking two great oceans and strengthening an historic alliance’ (Clinton, 2012). Australian rhetoric was similarly focused at the AUSMIN meeting, in which Smith (2012d) painted the context for ‘enhanced practical cooperation’ with ‘the world moving to the Indo-Pacific, not just with security implications but with enormous economic investment and prosperity implications’.

Of course, the question arises of what all this implies in terms of actual Indo-Pacific policy action rather than simply policy branding. Critics can argue that since 2007, the Labor Government has arguably preferred branding over substance: its rhetoric has often soared even as delivery has been absent. However, tangible examples of an emerging Indo-Pacific framework for Australia–United States cooperation can be also noted. This can be seen in the *Posture Review* recommendation for Australia extending facilities at HMAS *Stirling* near Perth: ‘to be used for deployments and operations in Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean by US Navy major surface combatants and aircraft carriers’ (Government of Australia, 2012a, p. 35). Along Australia’s northern coastline, increased facilities for the United States have been agreed under the *Force Posture Initiative* of 2011 (Government of Australia, 2012a, p. 41). The expansion of Darwin is partly with the United States in mind: ‘the new wharf would enable refuelling and logistics support for ... visiting US large amphibious ships’ (p. 34). Obama’s trip to

Australia, which brought an agreement between the two governments to expand the presence of rotational marine forces at Darwin, was explained by regional commentators in specific 'Indo-Pacific' (Backrie, 2012; Supriyanto, 2011) terms precisely because Darwin points west to the Eastern Indian Ocean, north to the South China Sea, and east to the Western Pacific. US deployment of UAV units on the Australian Indian Ocean island of Cocos is also being mooted in a specifically 'Indo-Pacific' (Luke, 2012) strategic setting. Tangible policy examples of an Indo-Pacific framework for Australia–India cooperation remain to be developed from the emerging rhetoric, although bilateral Australia–India naval exercises are scheduled for 2013.

The simultaneous strengthening of Australia–United States and Australia–India links in an 'Indo-Pacific' setting has also led to some movement toward trilateral Indo-Pacific operations. Some trilateral military cooperation has been carried out with both India and the United States by Australia in the Indo-Pacific. This was first seen in the *Malabar 2007* exercises when the Australian navy joined the US Pacific Fleet and the Indian Eastern Command (as well as units from Japan and Singapore) to carry out naval exercises in the Bay of Bengal. Such cooperation drew Chinese protests, as did talk that year of an Indo-Pacific *Quadrilateral Alliance* involving Australia, India, the United States, and Japan. Admittedly, after an initial meeting of civil servants from the four countries received formal Chinese complaints, Australia (as well as India) drew back from this overt talk in 2007 of quadrilateral formations, though maintaining the momentum of strengthening these bilateral and trilateral links during 2008–13.

Given the bilateral strategic convergences between India, Australia, and the United States, it is no surprise that a trilateral India–Australia–United States framework for the Indo-Pacific was mooted by scholars (Curtis *et al.*, 2011) from across Australia, the United States, and India in a widely commented (Sheridan, 2011) combined report subtitled *A Plan for US-Australia-India Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific*. It is also significant that such American commentators embed Australia in trilateral maritime settings. Hence, the desirability for Auslin of 'coordination between the U.S. and Indian navies, along with that of Australia', and that 'the United States and Australia should seek gradually to pool ISR [intelligence-surveillance-reconnaissance] data with India, giving a comprehensive awareness of threats and conditions from the Indian Ocean to

the western Pacific' (Auslin, 2010, p. 24). Their trilateral proposals were picked up by Kevin Rudd (Times of India, 2011). However, the Indian government distanced itself from Rudd's attributed comments, on the grounds that it would be too obviously China-centric and thus China-antagonizing. Nevertheless, a trilateral mechanism remains geopolitically logical for these adjacent maritime actors who have similar concerns about maritime security in general, including for these three liberal democracies' circumspect concerns about Chinese naval expansionism.

In this trilateral connection, the American and Indian usage of the term 'Indo-Pacific' has attracted clear and frequent China-centric balancing undertones (Scott, 2012; also Mohan, 2012). Part of the reason that the term Indo-Pacific has some advantages over the term Asia-Pacific in understanding Australian strategic deliberations is that Australian concerns over China are precisely because of China's growing naval presence not only in the Western Pacific and South China Sea but also because of an emerging Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean – i.e. the Indo-Pacific maritime continuum. Some Australian commentators such as Dennis Rumley argue that these China-centric balancing undertones of the Indo-Pacific concept are unhelpful:

The dominant narrative based on an Indo-Pacific Region security construction tends to be propagated by conservative practitioners and commentators concerned principally with the use of collective traditional security and hard power directed either overtly or covertly towards individual states, and more particularly, towards China. (Rumley *et al.*, 2012, p. 2; also Medcalf, 2012d, p. 4)

Australian domestic debate has been divided over where to draw the balance between economic engagement with China, as argued by Hugh White, 2011 and a degree of military–diplomatic balancing against China.

At this point, domestic debate within Australia meets wider IR theory in the shape of John Mearsheimer's *offensive realism* model. In a widely discussed (Beljac, 2010; Kelly, 2010; Monk, 2010; Stewart, 2010) presentation to a Sydney audience in 2010, Mearsheimer specifically applied such logic to Australia. He argued that balancing imperatives meant 'Australia—will join with the United States to contain China's power' (Mearsheimer, 2010, p. 382). With regard to China's military modernization program, 'none of China's neighbors, including Australia, will

consider it to be defensively oriented. They will instead view it as a formidable offensive force' (p. 384). Consequently, 'China—should it continue its rapid rise—will eventually present a serious enough threat to Australia that it will have no choice but to join the American-led alliance to contain China' (p. 394). Moreover, he argued that Indo-Pacific geopolitics will pose a particular challenge as China seeks to gain security access to the straits linking the Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean. Such a situation 'almost certainly means that China will maintain a significant military presence in the waters off the northern coast of Australia'; and, looking ahead, 'the steps that China takes to neutralize the threat that Australia poses to its sea lanes... will surely push Canberra to work closely with Washington to contain China' (pp. 395–396). Australia has not carried out such hard-explicit tight containment alliance as Mearsheimer's model envisages, but it remains true that within an overall policy of 'hedging' toward China, elements of softer-implicit loose *balancing* understandings are noticeable for Australia alongside other elements of *engagement*. An Australia–United States–India trilateral formation, across the Indo-Pacific would be as logical for Australia as the existing Australia–United States–Japan trilateral in the Western Pacific, and indeed would be as logical for India as its existing India–US–Japan strategic dialog mechanism spanning the Indo-Pacific.

6 Conclusions

The 'Indo-Pacific' concept is in one sense merely a geographical framework, a concept that already exists with regard to the study of marine science and hydrological surveys in these adjacent waters of the Indian and Pacific Oceans. With its common theme of sea lines of communication and energy flows, the Indo-Pacific is also a geoeconomic concept in which piracy–jihadist disruption affects its center point of the Strait of Malacca, and on which Australia can cooperate with other concerned powers, including China. As China and India continue their economic rise, and their maritime trade flows, the Indo-Pacific waters maintain an economic significance for Australia and others. In another sense, the 'Indo-Pacific' is a profoundly geopolitical and geoeconomic concept, which is already being pushed elsewhere, in particular by India and the United States (Scott, 2012). The concept's maritime nature gives a greater impetus to the application of sea power geopolitics (Mahan and Corbett come to mind), and shapes the choices for the deployment and

placement of assets by Australia for the Pacific and India Oceans as one strategic space. The Indo-Pacific concept also points to the development of strategic partners, particularly India and the United States, who from their respective Indian Ocean and Pacific settings are also increasingly operating Indo-Pacific maritime strategies and cooperating together on an Indo-Pacific basis (Scott, 2012). Australia could fit into such a convergence, with a central Indo-Pacific role linking not only the two oceans, but the two leading democracies from each ocean, India and the United States. Although the Indo-Pacific concept reflects and facilitates trilateral India–Australia–United States linkage, it also points to uncomfortable contradictory pulls on Australia:

Australia finds itself uncomfortably near the centre of the geo-strategic dynamics in the broader Indo-Pacific region. It has been balancing the two major players, the United States and China, each of which is critical to Australia’s security and economic well-being. (Salil, 2012, p.1)

Here, we can note that the ‘Indo-Pacific’ as a geopolitical term is not inherently tied to a containment of China meaning, though in practice it operates in such terms for many Australians. Nevertheless, some Australians argue that a different policy choice for Australia in the Indo-Pacific would be to foster a China–Australia–United States cooperative triangle, as suggested in talk by the ADF Chief, David Hurley (2013), of their trilateral naval exercises in the future as a confidence-building measure. Either way, such relationships are increasingly being hammered out for Australia in an Indo-Pacific setting.

Finally though, the ‘Indo-Pacific’ is a political concept for Australia in which different groups represent different emphases. The concept has its critics within Australia. Some Australian commentators have doubts that ‘an “Indo-Pacific” strategy for Australia is likely to make for a round of interesting headlines and media commentary, but find little in the way of substance’ given that ‘Australia is too small in size, mind and political culture to take on such a task’ (Bruni, 2012, p. 4). However, as Bruni admitted, ‘the only way this approach would be of benefit to Canberra is if it were deliberately tied to US global strategic manoeuvres’ (4). His critique, though, disappears when we consider that Australia’s Indo-Pacific strategy is, indeed, one that is not unilateral and based just on Australia’s own limited power. Rather, Australia’s emerging Indo-Pacific strategy is one that is converging and working with the

parallel US (and also Indian) strategies and cooperation in the Indo-Pacific waters.

Domestic political divides between West and East Australia affect the debate over regional frameworks and regional role. Undoubtedly, Stephen Smith's Perth background gives the Indo-Pacific cause a greater short-term political push within the Gillard Government. As Paul Kelly (2012), the editor at *The Australian* put it, an 'Indo-Pacific tide rises in the west', which 'testifies to the rising intellectual ambitions from Western Australia', but which is 'certain to meet resistance from our east coast elites' who have focused more on the Pacific and East Asia.

Nevertheless, ultimately, and quite simply, the greater reality of this Indo-Pacific *logic of geography* transcends domestic political considerations within Australia: 'in the longer term, and whatever the domestic political pressures, Australia will be unable to escape the dictates of the new strategic geography' (Gelber, 2012, p. 19). Such dictates makes the 'Indo-Pacific' concept an increasingly influential framework, a compelling strategic logic for Australia to shape its military strategy and strategic partnerships.

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