

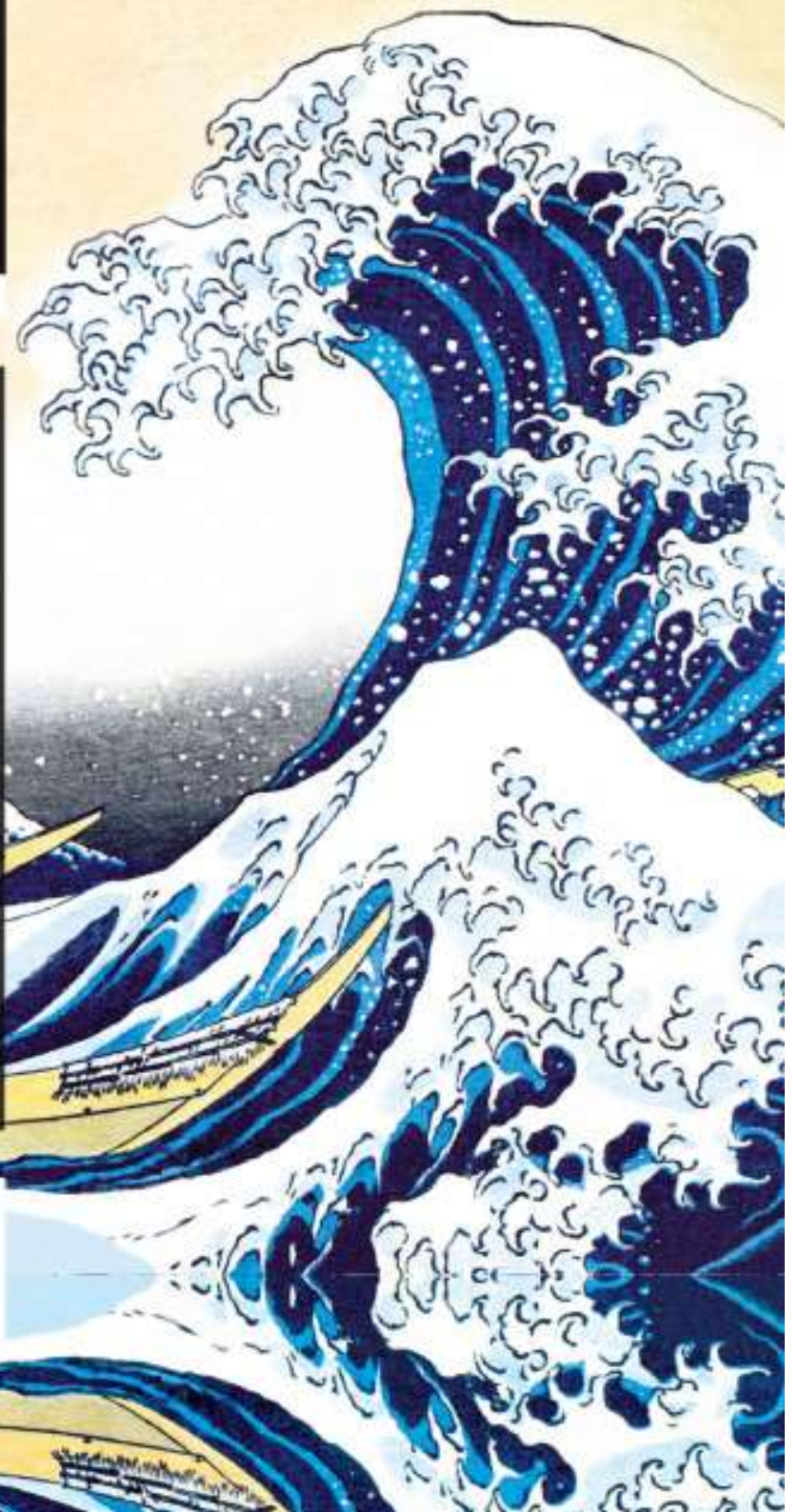


global POLICY

GP-ORF Series

Brass Tacks: Unpacking the Indo-Pacific Template

EDITED BY
Pratnashree Basu



Intersections Between Free and Open Indo-Pacific and Other Regional Templates

David Scott

Over the last decade, various intersecting templates for analysis and policy have flooded around the Indo-Pacific.

The starting point must be China. Although China famously compared talk of the “Indo-Pacific” to “froth” on the ocean that would blow away, in reality, Beijing has projected itself across the Indo-Pacific in geopolitical and geoeconomic fashion. (1) The country’s two-navy strategy, operating since the late 1990s, involves increasing naval operation in the Pacific and Indian Oceans, and the Maritime Silk Road initiative pushed by China since 2013 takes China from the South Pacific to Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean. From India’s point of view, this penetration is little more than the ‘string of pearls’ strategy suggested in 2005 that China has always denied but that is now leaving her with increasing port access and facilities. (2)

China’s increasing military appearance in both oceans led to former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s call for a “confluence of the oceans” in August 2007 for security cooperation between Japan and India, as well as seeking a “democratic security diamond” in

December 2012 between Australia, India, Japan and the US, a call denounced in the Chinese state media. (3) It also triggered increasing naval cooperation between India and Vietnam, between Australia, India, Japan and the US through the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), and also between the Quad and France. Although many Indo-Pacific states embraced the Maritime Silk Road, the US and India moved to boycott China's flagship initiative, refusing to take part in the Belt and Road Forum held in Beijing in April 2019. Alternatives were mooted. The Obama administration proposed an Indo-Pacific Economic Corridor linking South Asia with South-East Asia, while India and Japan proposed an Africa-Asia Growth Corridor in 2017, but neither scheme was operationalised. The Australia-Japan-India Blue Dot Network did get off the ground with funding committed and projects started in 2020, complete with interest from India and criticisms from China. (4)

Free and Open Indo-Pacific

China's advances triggered the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) initiative, coined by Abe in August 2016 and which immediately became the official mantra of Japanese regional policy. After initially ignoring the 'Indo-Pacific' term, the Trump administration adopted the FOIP phrasing in autumn 2017, a stance frequently and consistently denounced in China. (5)

The FOIP focussed on 'free' and 'open'. Free pointed politically to freedom and democracy, and economically to free enterprise, free markets and freedom of movement on the seas. This drove US freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea. Open related politically to an open society, and economically to open access to markets, resources and commercial routes. This was a clear implicit critique of China's political system and its geoeconomic and geopolitical push through the Indo-Pacific. Whereas Japan came to emphasise the economic side (and losing sight of the necessary military side), the US highlighted the military side (and losing sight of the necessary economic side) of the FOIP.

A problem with the FOIP is that it became associated with explicit China-containment, forcing regional countries to choose between the US and China. Accordingly, the message was pushed by India,

and welcomed in China, that the FOIP was *inclusive*. (6) This was a successful move in some sense, since Australia, Japan and the US then also used the phrasing in meetings with India. The keen observer would note that the original FOIP phrasing was used by the US and Japan in their bilateral meetings, with the word “inclusive” often dropped.

In one sense, this “inclusive” addition was reasonable enough since it could be put to Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries and others that they were to be included in the scope of the FOIP and that it was not just a framework for the bigger China-concerned states. However, to suggest that the FOIP was expected or designed to be inclusive of China misses its purpose. The FOIP was generated as a response against China; FOIP values were enunciated precisely because China’s values were the opposite. To include China (the problem and threat) within FOIP makes little strategic sense, and, if taken seriously, would undermine FOIP coherence and ability to pursue its stated free and open agenda.

Indo-Pacific Defense Initiative

The US military side of the FOIP was encapsulated in the Indo-Pacific Defense Initiative (IPDI) passed in January 2021 with bipartisan support. IPDI funding was set at US\$2.2 billion, within a record US\$740.5 billion budget. It included the explicit denunciation of Chinese actions in the South China Sea and its Maritime Silk Road push, named projects for reinforcing the US military position in the Western Pacific, and pinpointed strengthening military-security with states increasingly concerned about China like Australia, Japan and India (and also Taiwan). Two limitations in the IPDI were that it contained no named projects for strengthening the US military position in the Indian Ocean, and only covered 2021. The Biden administration’s IPDI proposals for the 2022 financial year, sent to Congress in May-2021, was for US\$5.1 billion, within a defence budget that was very much “eyeing China.” (7)

The Indo-Pacific Strategic Arc

The FOIP was preceded by Australian-generated phrase Indo-Pacific Strategic Arc (IPSA), first mentioned in the 2013 Defence White Paper and denounced in China. (8) The IPSA was a statement of Australia's own geopolitical identity, facing both the Indian and Pacific Oceans. The "arc" described where Australia intended to focus its foreign and defence policy, namely the Western Pacific, Southeast Asia and the Eastern Indian Ocean. The stated goal of focussing on particular security partnerships running along that arc (Japan, the US, Singapore, Indonesia and India), which bends around China, reflected the explicit reordering of Australian security thinking to implicitly constrain China. Despite close economic links with China, Australia has moved to strengthen such military security links around that country. Alongside its reaffirmed security links with the US, Australia has particularly strengthened defence relations with France, India and Japan. This was also on show with the Indo-Pacific Endeavour 2019 deployments, which saw significant maritime exercising across the Indo-Pacific with the French, Indian, Japanese and US navies. This was also reflected in October 2020 when Australia joined the hitherto trilateral India-Japan-US Malabar naval exercises, thereby in effect militarily operationalising the Quad.

Indo-Pacific Axis

This term was coined by France's President Emmanuel Macron during his visit to Australia and New Caledonia in May 2018. In New Caledonia, Macron talked of his "geopolitical ambition" to shape an "axis" (*l'axe*) between France, Australia India and Australia, while warning against creeping Chinese regional hegemony, a stance denounced by China. (9) A trilateral dialogue structure with Australia and India was set up in December 2020, focussing on maritime cooperation, 'geostrategic challenges' and 'adherence to international law in the Indo-Pacific.'

French security interests were reiterated in May 2019 through the defence ministry document 'France and Security in the Indo-Pacific.' (10) French strategy involves strengthening its security and military relations with Australia, India and Japan, complete with shared Indo-Pacific rhetoric on a free, open and secure/

inclusive Indo-Pacific. Trilateral military exercises between France, Japan and the US were initiated in 2017. France also deployed its carrier groups to the Indian Ocean in 2019, and again in 2021, where they carried out various bilateral, trilateral and quadrilateral exercises with naval units from Australia, India, Japan and the US.

ASEAN Indo-Pacific Outlook

Indonesia pushed the Indo-Pacific Cooperation Concept during 2018, reappearing as the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific in June 2019. The ASEAN Outlook represented an attempt to avoid a close identification with the US or with China, and as such, avoided any mention of US or Chinese Indo-Pacific initiatives. Instead, it emphasised “ASEAN centrality,” whereby Indo-Pacific regional cooperation would be steered through the ASEAN. It called for low-key economic cooperation and connectivity, with maritime cooperation focussing on combating pollution and sea piracy, and drugs trafficking rescue and safety matters. There were some mentions of norms, with a call for freedom of navigation and overflight, respect for international law and observance of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. Australia and India warmly welcomed this initiative. However, while the US noted its norms and China its calls for economic cooperation, neither particularly embraced its demand for an ASEAN-led process. ‘ASEAN centrality’ is often stressed but in reality, the ASEAN is too small a bloc to steer major powers like the US or China. By having nothing to say on hard security issues, or on Chinese policies, the ASEAN Outlook is perhaps left as a weak and ineffectual document.

Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative

The Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) was proposed by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the 2019 East Asia Summit, driving forward from his Security and Growth for All in the Region (or SAGAR) proposal for the Indian Ocean. Modi described the IPOI as being “to work collaboratively to safeguard the oceans including from plastic litter; build capacity and fairly share resources; reduce disaster risk; enhance science, technology and academic cooperation; and promote free, fair and mutually beneficial trade and maritime transport.” (11) No country rejected

the IPOI, with Australia and Indonesia particularly quick to endorse it. This was a skilful attempt to augment India's soft power and sidestep some of the allure of China's Maritime Silk Road. However, practical financing was absent, and no institutional machinery was set up to deliver it. Moreover, its goals were either low picking fruits or vague. Security issues were noticeably absent, and there was no direct grappling with China's economic push in the region.

Conclusion

There are two types of Indo-Pacific formulations. The ASEAN Outlook and the IPOI both stress economic and environmental cooperation that is difficult to argue against. However, they are perhaps too limited. As aspirational rather than operationally financed frameworks, they avoid dealing with the central problem of the Indo-Pacific—China's geoeconomic and geopolitical push. In contrast, the Indo-Pacific Strategic Arc, the FOIP and the Indo-Pacific Axis are overlapping politicised security pushbacks against China—and were unsurprisingly denounced by China. But the more China denounces specific Indo-Pacific initiatives, perhaps the more merit those initiatives gain.

Meanwhile, China continues to fear closer Indo-Pacific security agreements between its neighbours and their cooperation with the US. Beijing continues to vociferously warn against the Quad initiative, a mini “Indo-Pacific NATO being formed against China” by Australia, India, Japan and the US. (12) Beijing also fears an expansion of the Quad. (13) Moves by India, Japan and Australia to set up a post-COVID-19 Indo-Pacific trilateral supply chain were also denounced in China. (14) China had hoped for a US turn under President Joe Biden from “Indo-Pacific” security partnerships to a less involved “Asia-Pacific” economic stance. (15) These hopes have been dashed as Biden instead reiterated support for the FOIP concept, with particular emphasis now being placed by him on the Quad for Indo-Pacific security cooperation.

Endnotes:

- (1) Wang Yi, "Foreign Minister Wang Yi Meets the Press," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, March 09, 2018, www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1540928.shtml
- (2) Gopal Suri, "China's 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. Old String with New Pearls?," *Occasional Paper* (Vivekananda International Foundation), May 03, 2016, <https://www.vifindia.org/sites/default/files/china-s-21st-century-maritime-silk-road-old-string-with-new-pearls.pdf>
- (3) (3) "Japan's 'Indo-Pacific' Concept Another Platform for Containing China," *Global Times*, October 13, 2014, www.globaltimes.cn/content/886012.shtml
- (4) *Ai Jun*, "Quad Offers no Substitute for BRI in Indo-Pacific," *Global Times*, November 15, 2018, www.globaltimes.cn/content/1127645.shtml
- (5) Qian Feng, "Hegemonic Nature of US Indo-Pacific Strategy Exposed," *Global Times*, June 19, 2020, www.globaltimes.cn/content/1191972.shtml
- (6) Long Xingchun, "India Raises Own Version of Indo-Pacific," *Global Times*, December 29, 2019, www.globaltimes.cn/content/1175184.shtml
- (7) Joe Gould, "Eyeing China, Biden Defense Budget Boosts Research and Cuts Procurement," *Defense News*, May 28, 2021, <https://www.defensenews.com/congress/2021/05/28/eyeing-china-biden-defense-budget-boosts-research-and-cuts-procurement/>
- (8) Zhang Genhai and Wang Ying, "'Indo-Pacific Strategic Arc' and Implications of Alignment Among the US, India, Japan and Australia on Security in the South China Sea," *South Asian Studies*, 4 (2017): 93-104, <http://jtp.cnki.net/bilingual/detail/html/LAYA201704007>
- (9) "Macron Savors Role in Indo-Pacific," *Global Times*, May 03, 2018, www.globaltimes.cn/content/1100667.shtml
- (10) *Ministre des Armées, France and Security in the Indo-Pacific*, 2019, https://franceintheus.org/IMG/pdf/France_and_Security_in_the_Indo-Pacific_-_2019.pdf
- (11) "Prime Minister's Speech at the East Asia Summit, November 04, 2019," Ministry of External Affairs, https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/32171/Prime_Ministers_Speech_at_the_East_Asia_Summit_04_November_2019
- (12) Wang Qi and Xu Keyue, "Japan, Australia Eye Defense Pact; a Potential 'Indo-Pacific NATO' Could be Formed Against China," *Global Times*, November 17, 2020, www.globaltimes.cn/content/1207154.shtml
- (13) Lu Yuanzhi, "US Ambitions to Expand QUAD Set to Fail," *Global Times*, October 25, 2020, www.globaltimes.cn/content/1204600.shtml
- (14) "Indo-Pacific Trilateral Supply Chain a Lame Pivot for Australia Against China," *Global Times*, September 01, 2020, www.globaltimes.cn/content/1199574.shtml
- (15) "Biden Should Revamp Asia-Pacific Path, Ditch Indo-Pacific Idea," *Global Times*, November 25, 2020, www.globaltimes.cn/content/1208033.shtml