



# The Indo-Pacific Geopolitical OBSERVATORY

## WHERE FROM... WHITHER TO: TRENDS AND TRIBULATIONS OF THE INDO-PACIFIC CONCEPT

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## AUTHOR'S PRESENTATION



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## THE INDO-PACIFIC GEOPOLITICAL OBSERVATORY PRESENTATION

The IRIS Indo-Pacific Geopolitical Observatory aims to provide a visible and referenced platform for all contributions and readings of the Indo-Pacific coming from a variety of disciplines. It offers a forum for analysis and debate, as well as a thematic library on an area whose relevance is only just beginning to be discussed.

This observatory is co-directed by **Marianne Péron-Doise**, Associate Research Fellow at IRIS, and **Éric Mottet**, Senior Research Fellow at IRIS, and is part of the Asia-Pacific Programme.

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The Indo-Pacific idea represents the new maritime-configured supra-region. It was conceived in 2006-2007 due to the growing realisation that the security of the Western Pacific littoral states was becoming closely intertwined with the developments in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). There is hardly a comparable concept in history like the Indo-Pacific, which has become so central to the global geopolitical discourse in a short span of less than two decades. Over these few years, the Indo-Pacific concept has also undergone major transmutations in response to the emerging geopolitical environment within the region, and beyond.

This paper traces the evolution of the Indo-Pacific concept since its origin to understand its transformative journey to the present day. In doing so, it examines the approaches of the major regional and stakeholder players—along with their respective Indo-Pacific visions and strategies—and the key developments that have impacted policy-making relating to the concept. It specifically analyses the three “Indo-Pacific Pivots”—the seminal milestones in the Indo-Pacific Concept—that have radically altered its nature at different points in time.

The first pivot occurred in November 2017 consequent to the Asia Tour of the then President of the United States (US) Donald Trump. The second was coronavirus pandemic (Covid-19) that coincided with the diversification of the Indo-Pacific agenda in 2020-21 to “softer” issues beyond military security. The third was the onset of the Russia-Ukraine war in February 2022, that has brought back the focus of the Indo-Pacific on military competition through the involvement of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

## ORIGIN OF INDO-PACIFIC CONCEPT

In its current geopolitical avatar representing the security linkage between the Indian and Pacific oceans, the Indo-Pacific idea was born in October 2006 during the annual dialogue held at New Delhi between the leading Indian and Japanese think tanks, viz, the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), New Delhi and the Japan Institute for International Affairs (JIIA), Tokyo. The two sides discussed the emerging maritime security issues connecting the two oceans. The piracy rampant in the Malacca Straits had begun to manifest off Somalia. There was also growing concerns of maritime terrorism and the trafficking of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) across the arc from North Korea to Iran, which had led to the US Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) in 2004. The dialogue was focused on China’s increasing strategic footprints in the Indian Ocean. More specifically, the dialogue discussed the 2005 US report on China’s “String of Pearls”, which could potentially be used by Beijing as military

bases in the Indian Ocean<sup>1</sup>, and the PLA Navy's growing distant force-projection capability, as represented by its first new-generation *Shang*-Class nuclear attack submarine (SSN) inducted a few months earlier in 2006. Tokyo was worried about the Chinese naval threat to its sea-based (energy and food) lifelines in the Indian Ocean. New Delhi was concerned about the opening of the seaward dimension of the Chinese threat in the Indian Ocean, besides the insecurities to the shipping in the Western Pacific carrying Indian trade and seafarers.

Soon after the dialogue, the author – who was then a Research Fellow at IDSA – wrote a paper titled, “India-Japan Sealine Security Cooperation”, which was published in IDSA's *Strategic Analysis* journal in January 2007. The paper introduced the geographical boundaries of the Indo-Pacific space. It did not seek to speculate the threat posed by China in the Indian Ocean, and therefore, avoided its explicit mention. It, nonetheless, stated that whereas “...the threats to SLOCs (Sea Lines of Communication) due to military conflicts have receded globally.... exceptions persist in the Indo-Pacific region”.<sup>2</sup> Based on Indian Navy's increasing focus on SLOC security, it proposed that India and Japan could cooperate in this area. The Indo-Pacific was, therefore, merely a defensive and implicit response to China's potentially aggressive intent in the maritime space stretching across the two oceans.

A few months later in August 2007, Japan's Prime Minister (P.M.) Shinzo Abe addressed the Indian Parliament. Speaking of the “Confluence of the Two Seas”, he specifically sought India's cooperation for “the security of sea lanes” as an essential prerequisite for the attainment of “the Arc of Freedom and Prosperity” in “the broader Asia”.<sup>3</sup> Whereas Shinzo Abe did not specifically mention the term “Indo-Pacific”, his address received worldwide acclaim as being the genesis of Japan's Indo-Pacific vision. Later in August 2016, the vision was formally endorsed by Shinzo Abe during his visit to Kenya tour, and also qualified by the terms “Free and Open”.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> China builds up strategic sea lanes', *The Washington Times*, January 17, 2005. <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2005/jan/17/20050117-115550-1929r/> Also see, Gurpreet S Khurana, “China's 'String of Pearls' in the Indian Ocean and Its Security Implications”, *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 32(1), January 2008, at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09700160801886314>

<sup>2</sup> Gurpreet S Khurana, ‘Security of Sea Lines: Prospects for India–Japan Cooperation’, *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 31(1), January/February 2007 Issue, pp.139 and 144. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09700160701355485>

<sup>3</sup> ‘Confluence of the Two Seas’, Speech by H.E. Mr. Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan at the Parliament of the Republic of India, August 22, 2007, Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) website, at <http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/speech-2.html>

<sup>4</sup> Address by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe at the Opening Session of the Sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD VI), August 27, 2016, Nairobi (Kenya), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 27 August 2017. [https://www.mofa.go.jp/af/af2/page4e\\_000496.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/af/af2/page4e_000496.html)

## INDIA AND THE INDO-PACIFIC

In the following years, India and Japan bolstered naval cooperation. In 2014, Japan was incorporated in the annual high-level India-U.S. *Malabar* naval exercises, which began to be conducted in the Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific in alternate years. However, India did not formally endorse the Indo-Pacific concept until a decade after P.M. Shinzo Abe's August 2007 address in India. New Delhi seems to have dismissed the geopolitical value of the Indo-Pacific Concept as a mere academic proposition. This was unfortunate for New Delhi since the Indian political leadership had realised the need for India's eastward geo-economic reorientation as long ago as in 1991, which led to its "Look East Policy" (LEP). Later in 2014, India's new Narendra Modi government upgraded the LEP to a more proactive and multifaceted "Act East" policy to engage with its extended neighbours of the Western Pacific.<sup>5</sup>

Nonetheless, Indian academics continued to write about the Indo-Pacific in the security and strategic context. For instance, the author's book chapter titled, "Security of Maritime Energy Lifelines: Policy Imperatives for India" published in 2009 was premised on Indo-Pacific region.<sup>6</sup> (The chapter was drawn from the author's paper presentation in a conference in September 2006<sup>7</sup>). Similarly, in 2012, the Indian strategic analyst Raja Mohan authored a book titled *Samudramanathan*, which described the emerging China-India "naval rivalry in the Indo-Pacific region".<sup>8</sup>

## UNITED STATES AND THE INDO-PACIFIC

In the US, an opposite trend was witnessed. The Indo-Pacific concept was noted by the government earlier than by America's academia. In October 2010, the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton used the term "Indo-Pacific" in context of India-U.S. naval cooperation. In 2011, the American analyst Robert Kaplan authored his book titled *Monsoon*, wherein he demonstrated the criticality of Indian Ocean for the future of US power in the 21<sup>st</sup> century geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific continuum.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> "Act East Policy", Press Release, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, December 23, 2015. <https://pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=133837>

<sup>6</sup> Gurpreet S Khurana, "Security of Maritime Energy Lifelines: Policy Imperatives for India", in Ligia Noronha and A. Sudarshan (eds.) *India's Energy Security*. (Routledge, New York: 2009), pp. xv (Preface) and 108-126.

<sup>7</sup> Paper presented by the author at Conference titled "India's Energy Security: foreign, trade and security policy contexts", organised by *The Energy and Resources Institute* (TERI, India) and *Konrad Adenauer Foundation* (KAS, Germany) on September 29-30, 2006 at Goa, India.

<sup>8</sup> C. Raja Mohan. *Samudra Manthan: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: 2012).

<sup>9</sup> Robert D. Kaplan. *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power* (Random House, New York: 2011).

The following year, during her visit to Australia in November 2012, the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton lauded India as “an important player in the Indo-Pacific region” that needs to play a larger role in the region's affairs.<sup>10</sup> The repeated use of the term “Indo-Pacific” by the US Secretary of State is unlikely to be a happenstance. Ostensibly, after China established its naval presence in the Indian Ocean through its Gulf of Aden anti-piracy mission in December 2008, the US had begun to realise the inadequacy of the Asia-Pacific concept to meet its geopolitical objectives in Asia.

In 2013, the Commander of US Pacific Command (PACOM) Admiral Samuel Locklear, in his posture report to the US Congress, referred to his area of responsibility as the “Indo-Asia-Pacific”. However, until 2015, the official conceptualisation of the US administration remained confined to the “Asia-Pacific”, possibly because it was tied to President Obama’s “Rebalance to Asia” strategy announced in early 2012.<sup>11</sup> In March 2015, the US released its a new maritime strategy document titled “A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower”, which formally used the term “Indo-Asia-Pacific”.<sup>12</sup> This conceptualisation incorporated India and the Indian Ocean in America’s geostrategy, while also enabling the US to maintain its relevance as a resident power in Asia.<sup>13</sup>

## CHINA AND THE INDO-PACIFIC

China was averse to the Indo-Pacific concept since 2012 when it first noted the emerging academic literature on the subject, and possibly also the articulation by the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. In October 2012, Australian writers Nick Bisley and Andrew Phillips wrote, “...Viewed from Beijing, the idea of the Indo-Pacific... appears to be to keep the US in, lift India up, and keep China out of the Indian Ocean... the Indo-Pacific concept has (therefore)...received a frosty reception in China...”.<sup>14</sup> Chinese academics were divided. In June 2013, Minghao Zhao wrote, “...a power game of great significance has unfolded in Indo-Pacific Asia. The US, India, Japan and other players are seeking to collaborate to build an ‘Indo-

<sup>10</sup> ‘Hillary Clinton lauds India's role in Indo-Pacific region, urges for increased participation’, *India Today*, 14 November 2012, at <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/rest-of-the-world/story/hillary-clinton-lauds-indias-role-indo-pacific-region-talks-china-briefly-in-australia-121455-2012-11-14>

<sup>11</sup> “Pivot to the Pacific? The Obama Administration’s Rebalancing Toward Asia”, CRS Report for Congress, Congressional Research Service (CRS), March 28, 2012. <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/natsec/R42448.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> “A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower”, Department of the (US) Navy, Washington DC, March 2015, pp.11-13. <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA615292.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Mercy A. Kuo, “The Origin of ‘Indo-Pacific’ as Geopolitical Construct”, *The Diplomat*, January 25, 2018. <https://thediplomat.com/2018/01/the-origin-of-indo-pacific-as-geopolitical-construct/>

<sup>14</sup> Nick Bisley (La Trobe University, Australia) and Andrew Phillips (University of Queensland, Australia), ‘*The Indo-Pacific: what does it actually mean?*’, *East Asia Forum*, 06 Oct 12, at <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2012/10/06/the-indo-pacific-what-does-it-actually-mean/>

Pacific order’ that is congenial to their long-term interests... China is not necessarily excluded from this project, and it should seek a seat at the table and help recast its strategic objectives...”<sup>15</sup> However, others opposed this view. In July 2013, Zhao Qinghai, an analyst at China Institute of International Studies (CIIS) said, “Indo-Pacific concept ‘lifts India up’ to the detriment of China”.<sup>16</sup>

## OCEANIA AND THE INDO-PACIFIC

Since Oceania straddles both Indian and Pacific oceans, the Indo-Pacific concept has long been used in functional communications within Australia and New Zealand. Their academia has also published papers referring to Indo-Pacific in the geo-economic context. However, the term was never mentioned in the current strategic context until when the Australian analyst Rory Medcalf wrote in December 2012 that “Indo-Pacific” is a “a term whose time has come”.<sup>17</sup> In the following year, the Australian government formally articulated the “Indo-Pacific” concept in its May 2013 Defense White Paper, which was also the first mention of the Indo-Pacific concept in any official document worldwide.<sup>18</sup> Commenting on the White Paper, Rory Medcalf endorsed India’s centrality in the Indo-Pacific construct stating that “Australia’s new defence policy recognises India’s eastward orientation”.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Minghao Zhao, ‘The Emerging Strategic Triangle in Indo-Pacific Asia’, *The Diplomat*, 4 Jun 13, at <http://thediplomat.com/china-power/the-emerging-strategic-triangle-in-indo-pacific-asia/>

<sup>16</sup> Qinghai, Zhao, “印太”概念及其对中国的含义” (The concept of "Indo-Pacific" and its meaning to China), *Contemporary International Relations*, China Institute for International Studies (CIIS), 31 July 2013. [https://www.ciis.org.cn/yjcg/xslw/202007/t20200710\\_1265.html](https://www.ciis.org.cn/yjcg/xslw/202007/t20200710_1265.html)

<sup>17</sup> Rory Medcalf, ‘A Term Whose Time Has Come: The Indo-Pacific’, *The Diplomat*, 4 Dec 12, at <http://thediplomat.com/flashpoints-blog/2012/12/04/a-term-whose-time-has-come-the-indo-pacific/>

<sup>18</sup> Defending Australia and its National Interests. Defence White Paper, 2013, Department of Defense, Government of Australia.

[https://www.aph.gov.au/About\\_Parliament/Parliamentary\\_Departments/Parliamentary\\_Library/pubs/rp/rp1516/DefendAust/2013](https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp1516/DefendAust/2013)

<sup>19</sup> Rory Medcalf ‘*The Indo-Pacific Pivot*’, *Indian Express*, 10 May 13, at <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/the-indopacific-pivot/1113736/>

## INDONESIA AND THE INDO-PACIFIC

Alike Oceania, Indonesia is geographically central to the Indo-Pacific region, which has led Jakarta to embrace the Indo-Pacific concept with much optimism. In May 2013, the Indonesian Foreign Minister, Marty Natelegawa, proposed an “Indo-Pacific wide Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation”.<sup>20</sup> The next year, in November 2014, Indonesia’s President Jokowi addressed the 9<sup>th</sup> East Asia Summit (EAS) in Myanmar. He proposed a region-wide maritime cooperation involving Indonesia as the “*Porus Maritime Dunia*” (Global Maritime Fulcrum) in determining the future of the Pacific and Indian Ocean regions (PACINDO).<sup>21</sup>

### FIRST INDO-PACIFIC PIVOT: 2017

In November 2017, the US President Donald Trump articulated his “Indo-Pacific” strategy during his Asia tour.<sup>22</sup> To implement his strategy, the President sought to build an anti-China alliance by reviving the earlier Quad – comprising Australia, India, Japan and the US – and calling for first meeting of Quad 2.0.<sup>23</sup> This turned out to be a seminal event that altered the fundamental character of the original Indo-Pacific concept. From being a defensive and constructive vision articulated by Shinzo Abe, the Indo-Pacific was now transformed into a US strategy to contain China. Whereas it was becoming necessary to deter Beijing’s increased politico-military aggressiveness since 2007, America’s bellicose quest could polarise Asia. Soon thereafter, this sentiment was expressed by the author through his paper published in the *Washington Post* titled, “Trump’s new Cold War alliance in Asia is dangerous”.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> “Presiden Jokowi Deklarasikan Indonesia Sebagai Poros Maritim Dunia (President Jokowi Declares Indonesia as a World Maritime Axis)”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, November 15, 2014. <https://www.kemlu.go.id/id/berita/siaran-pers/Pages/Presiden-Jokowi-Deklarasikan-Indonesia-Sebagai-Poros-Maritim-Dunia.aspx>

<sup>21</sup> *ibid*

<sup>22</sup> “Why Trump keeps saying Indo-Pacific”, *BBC News*, 9 November 2017. <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-asia-41912990/why-trump-keeps-saying-indo-pacific>

<sup>23</sup> Bhattacharjee, Kallol, “India, Japan, US, Australia hold first ‘Quad’ talks at Manila ahead of ASEAN Summit”, *The Hindu*, November 12, 2017. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-highlights-indo-pacific-cooperation-at-the-first-quad-talks/article20317526.ece>

<sup>24</sup> Gurpreet S. Khurana, ‘Trump’s new Cold War alliance in Asia is dangerous’, *The Washington Post*, November 14, 2017, at [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldpost/wp/2017/11/14/trump-asia-trip/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.7de0c9ac7ac3](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldpost/wp/2017/11/14/trump-asia-trip/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.7de0c9ac7ac3)



A few months later in early-2018, the US National Security Council (NSC) issued a secret document called “US Strategic Framework for Indo-Pacific”, which was later declassified in May 2021. Among the most notable US strategic objectives laid down in the document were: to enable “the US to be viewed as the preferred partner of most Indo-Pacific nations, (and particularly by) India as a preferred partner on security issues”; and to “deter China from using military force against the US and US allies or partners, and develop the capabilities and concepts to defeat Chinese actions across the spectrum of conflict.”<sup>25</sup> Soon thereafter in May 2018, the US PACOM was renamed as INDO-PACOM (Indo-Pacific Command). President Trump statements thus also transformed the Indo-Pacific vision to the Indo-Pacific regional construct, coinciding with the operational area of responsibility of one US combatant command.

In June 2019, the US released its *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report*. Having been drafted by its Department of Defense, it confirmed the military focus of America’s Indo-Pacific conceptualisation.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, the overarching strategic objective of the US to contain China became evident in its revised Indo-Pacific Strategy released in February 2022 specifically.<sup>27</sup> Notably, the document bears no mention of Russia, even though its “special military operation” against Ukraine was imminent at that time.

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<sup>25</sup> “US Strategic Framework for Indo-Pacific”, National Security Council, US Government, 2018 (Secret, declassified on May 1, 2012), p. 3 and 7. <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/IPS-Final-Declass.pdf>

<sup>26</sup> “Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region”, Department of Defense, US Government, June 1, 2019. <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jul/01/2002152311/-1/-1/1/DEPARTMENT-OF-DEFENSE-INDO-PACIFIC-STRATEGY-REPORT-2019.PDF>

<sup>27</sup> Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States, The White House, Washington D.C., February 2022. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>

## CHINA'S RESPONSE

The concerns in Beijing relating to the Indo-Pacific Concept rose palpably after President Trump's "Indo-Pacific" 2017 statement. China's *People's Daily* analysed it as a reincarnation of the US "Rebalance to Asia" to "restrict China and weaken its influence in Asia-Pacific, wherein India would be the strategic pillar". It also alluded to the Quad, saying that, "the US is actively promoting India's Act East policy, which is deeply integrated with the Indo-Pacific strategy of the US and Japan, and gradually forms the Asian security architecture dominated by the U.S, India, Japan and Australia".<sup>28</sup> A year later, in March 2018, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi dismissed the "Indo-Pacific" as "an attention-grabbing idea" that would "dissipate like ocean foam".<sup>29</sup> When this did not come to pass, in 2020, Wang Yi acknowledged that the Quad was a "security threat" and the Indo-Pacific a "new (Asian) NATO".<sup>30</sup> Beijing has since been seeking to shape the perceptions among the regional countries that the Indo-Pacific and Quad are destabilising for the region, whereas China offers more benign "developmental" alternatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Realising that it may lose to China's "charm" offensive, the US initiated its own battle of narratives through the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) launched in May 2022,<sup>31</sup> besides many other initiatives through the Quad (as examined later). However, President Xi Jinping does not seem to be giving up, and has lately buttressed it "benign" narrative with the Global Development Initiative (GDI), the Global Security Initiative (GSI) and the Global Civilisation Initiative (GCI).<sup>32</sup>

<sup>28</sup> "不谈"亚太"谈"印太" 特朗普访华前在暗示什么 (Don't talk about 'Asia-Pacific' and talk about 'Indo-Pacific': What is hinted before Trump's visit to China?), 人民日报海外版-海外网 (*People's Daily Overseas Edition*), 分享 1,116 评论 2017 年 11 月 06 日 (06 November 2017), at <http://news.sina.com.cn/w/zx/2017-11-06/doc-ifymnae2345205.shtml>

<sup>29</sup> Donald K. Emmerson, 'In Search for the Real Indo-Pacific', *YaleGlobal Online*, 14 June 2018, at <https://yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/search-real-indo-pacific>

<sup>30</sup> Patranobis, Sutirtho, "China slams upcoming in-person Quad summit in Washington", *Hindustan Times*, September 14, 2021 [online]. Available at: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/china-slams-upcoming-in-person-quad-summit-in-washington-101631617475404.html>

<sup>31</sup> "Fact Sheet: In Asia, President Biden and a Dozen Indo-Pacific Partners Launch the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity", Press Brief, *The White House*, May 23, 2022. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/05/23/fact-sheet-in-asia-president-biden-and-a-dozen-indo-pacific-partners-launch-the-indo-pacific-economic-framework-for-prosperity/>

<sup>32</sup> "Initiatives Proposed by China, Fruitful Outcomes Shared by World", Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Independent State of Samoa, May 22, 2023. [http://ws.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/xwtd/202305/t20230522\\_11081047.htm](http://ws.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/xwtd/202305/t20230522_11081047.htm)

## INDIA'S RESPONSE

During his address at the June 2018 *Shangri la Dialogue*, Prime Minister Narendra Modi eventually embraced the Indo-Pacific concept, albeit implicitly distancing India from the US Indo-Pacific Strategy. His Indo-Pacific vision was an attempt to assuage regional anxieties by showcasing Indo-Pacific Concept in a benign light, as it was originally conceived in 2006-07. It encompassed the sub-concepts of “inclusiveness”, “openness” and “ASEAN centrality”. He said that the Indo-Pacific was not a (military) strategy directed against any country; it is “a positive one (involving) many elements (of security)”.<sup>33</sup> He implied that the concept of “security” relates to multifarious aspects like human safety, economic connectivity, managing new technologies, sustainable harvesting of maritime resources, climate change, health care and so on.

India's response was thus consonant with the original conceptualisation of Indo-Pacific that was never defined by the “hard” dimension of security. The Quad 1.0 itself (2007) was formed to undertake a humanitarian mission in response to the 2004 Tsunami in the Indian Ocean. To avoid the erroneous perception that the Quad 2.0 was a quasi-military pact, India avoided incorporating Australia into the India-US-Japan *Malabar* naval exercise.<sup>34</sup> However, after China's military aggression across India's northern borders between 2016 and 2020, New Delhi was forced to respond to China by incorporating Australia in *Malabar-2020*.<sup>35</sup> *Malabar* thus effectively became a Quad event. Since then, Quad cooperation has continued to involve military forces to deter China. Nonetheless, it's eventually expanded to non-military issues, which ushered the second Indo-Pacific Pivot in 2021.

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<sup>33</sup> Text of Prime Minister's Keynote Address at Shangri La Dialogue, Press Information Bureau (PIB), Government of India, Prime Minister's Office, 01 June 2018 [online]. Available at: <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=179711>

<sup>34</sup> 'Australia ready to join Malabar naval exercise', *Business Standard*, 13 December 2017 [online]. Available at: [https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ians/australia-ready-to-join-malabar-naval-exercise-117121301562\\_.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ians/australia-ready-to-join-malabar-naval-exercise-117121301562_.html)

<sup>35</sup> “Australia joins Exercise MALABAR 2020”, Australian Government (Department of Defence), November 3, 2020. <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/minister/lreynolds/media-releases/australia-joins-exercise-malabar-2020>

## ASEAN RESPONSE

The Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was initially averse to the US President's Indo-Pacific strategy since it would have forced ASEAN states to choose between the US and China, leading to weakening of ASEAN solidarity. However, a combination of factors eventually made the ASEAN realise that the Indo-Pacific concept was becoming necessary to meet its collective interests. The possible factors were: India's June 2018 Indo-Pacific vision statement, the assurance by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in August 2018 that ASEAN would be central to Washington's Indo-Pacific Strategy,<sup>36</sup> and Indonesia's leadership role in ASEAN. In June 2019, therefore, the 34<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Summit at Bangkok culminated in adoption of the "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific" (AOIP), which endorsed the centrality of the ASEAN as the underlying principle for any regional cooperation.<sup>37</sup>

## EUROPE'S RESPONSE

The initial response of the European Union (EU) to the President Trump's 2017 Indo-Pacific statement circumspect. As a German analyst said, "A strategic alignment of the Indo-Pacific Quad is tempting (but) involves a quasi-military alliance, which would run counter to the EU's approach of strengthening regional solutions and cooperation".<sup>38</sup> However, unlike ASEAN countries like Vietnam and the Philippines, European states like France and the United Kingdom (UK) favoured the Indo-Pacific Concept. France, with its territorial possessions across both the oceans, was the quickest in Europe to release its Indo-Pacific strategy in May 2018,<sup>39</sup> followed by Germany in September 2020<sup>40</sup> and the Netherlands in November 2020.<sup>41</sup> In

<sup>36</sup> Zakir Hussain, 'US remains committed to Asean centrality, Mike Pompeo tells foreign ministers', *The Straits Times*, 3 August 2018, at <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/us-remains-committed-to-asean-centrality-mike-pompeo-tells-foreign-ministers>

<sup>37</sup> "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific", Association for Southeast Asian Nations", June 23, 2021. <https://asean.org/speechandstatement/asean-outlook-on-the-indo-pacific/>.

<sup>38</sup> Mercy A Kuo, 'What the EU Thinks of the US 'Indo-Pacific' Strategy', *The Diplomat*, 31 January 2018, at <https://thediplomat.com/2018/01/what-the-eu-thinks-of-the-us-indo-pacific-strategy/>

<sup>39</sup> *France's Indo-Pacific Strategy*. Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, Government of France, May 2018 [online]. Available at: [https://au.ambafrance.org/IMG/pdf/en\\_indopacifique\\_web\\_cle0f44b5.pdf?13678/a892c4f93ab0687400274085650d6d72973af817](https://au.ambafrance.org/IMG/pdf/en_indopacifique_web_cle0f44b5.pdf?13678/a892c4f93ab0687400274085650d6d72973af817)

<sup>40</sup> "Germany – Europe – Asia: Shaping the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Together, Policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific region", The Federal Government, Republic of Germany, September 1, 2020. <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blob/2380514/35e5c739e1c9a5c52b6469cfd1ffc72d/200901-indo-pazifik-leitlinien--1--data.pdf>

<sup>41</sup> Strangio, Sebastian, "Following France and Germany, the Netherlands Pivots to the Indo-Pacific", *The Diplomat*,

September 2021, the EU promulgated its own Indo-Pacific strategy. It reiterated the need for the EU to “reinforce its strategic focus, presence and actions in the Indo-Pacific” through multifaceted partnerships with the Asian countries. Implicitly centred upon China's behaviour, the document expressed concern over the “intense geopolitical competition...” across all areas ranging from economic connectivity to security and human rights, which “directly impact upon on the EU’s interests”.<sup>42</sup> Concurrently, the EU launched its “Global Gateway” as an economic-connectivity plan meant to counter China's BRI, in a manner that it would create “links”, rather than “dependencies”.<sup>43</sup>

## SECOND INDO-PACIFIC PIVOT: 2021

As mentioned earlier, in 2018 India attempted to showcase the Indo-Pacific Concept in a benign light, rather than as a military strategy against China. Hence, by 2021, the Indo-Pacific concept was clearly reoriented to incorporate collaboration in a wide spectrum of aspects beyond military security. The process of such reorientation coincided with the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, which may even have facilitated an emphasis more humane aspects of international relations. On India’s insistence, by 2021, the US also agreed to adopt “a softer focus for the Quad”.<sup>44</sup> At the September 2021 Quad Leaders’ Summit in Washington DC, the Quad incorporated benign collaborative themes like vaccines, digital connectivity, resilient supply chains, green shipping network, and cyber-security.<sup>45</sup> Based on these themes, a few Quad initiatives were contextualised in response to the potential threat from China, such as the Quad Cyber Challenge; those for building alternative semiconductor supply chains;<sup>46</sup> Quad’s Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness Initiative (IPMDA); and the Quad Partnership for (undersea) Cable Connectivity and Resilience. Many others were clearly for common good. For instance, the Quad Vaccine Partnership announced in March 2021, which

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November 18, 2020 [online]. Available at: <https://thedi diplomat.com/2020/11/following-france-and-germany-the-netherlands-pivots-to-the-indo-pacific/>

<sup>42</sup> “Questions and Answers: EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific”, European Commission, September 16, 2021. [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/QANDA\\_21\\_4709](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/QANDA_21_4709)

<sup>43</sup> Lau, Stuart and Cokelaere, Hanne, “EU launches ‘Global Gateway’ to counter China’s Belt and Road”, *Politico*, September 15, 2021 [online]. <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-launches-global-gateway-to-counter-chinas-belt-and-road/>

<sup>44</sup> Haider, Suhashini, “US outlines a softer focus for Quad”, *The Hindu*, October 10, 2021 [online]. Available at: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/biden-administration-outlines-a-softer-focus-for-quad/article36930310.ece>

<sup>45</sup> “Fact Sheet: Quad Leaders’ Summit”, Statements and releases, *The White House*. September 24, 2021 [online]. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/09/24/fact-sheet-quad-leaders-summit/>

<sup>46</sup> Krishnan, Raghu, “Quad alliance joins hands to secure semiconductor, 5G tech supply chains”, *The Economic Times*, September 26, 2021. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/quad-alliance-joins-hands-to-secure-semiconductor-5g-tech-supply-chains/articleshow/86522479.cms?from=mdr>

led to the delivery of 400 million Covid vaccine doses to the regional countries. The Quad Climate Change Adaptation and Mitigation Package (Q-CHAMP) were launched in 2022. The 2023 Quad Leaders' Summit led to the launch of the and the *Quad Health Security Partnership*.<sup>47</sup>

The dilation of Indo-Pacific agenda to holistic security coincided with the launch of the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) by India in November 2019 during the 14<sup>th</sup> East Asia Summit (EAS) in Bangkok. The IPOI encompasses seven thematic areas of cooperation, viz. maritime ecology; maritime security; marine resources; capacity building and resource sharing; disaster risk reduction and management; science, technology and academic cooperation; and trade, connectivity and maritime transport.<sup>48</sup>

While maintaining the principle of ASEAN Centrality, the Quad's outreach has since expanded beyond the ASEAN to the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), and even the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF). India is also playing a leadership role to formulate the IORA Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (IOIP), akin to the AOIP.

The singular aberration during the period of the Second Indo-Pacific Pivot was the launch of the AUKUS Alliance. With the Quad having expanded its functional ambit to holistic security in September 2021, the "anglophone" quest for the military security clearly remained unaddressed. Hence, the US, combined with Australia and the UK formed the AUKUS alliance the same month (september 2021), as an alternative ("hard") tool of the Indo-Pacific concept, which focused on equipping Australia with subsurface distant force-projection capability against China in the form of SSNs.<sup>49</sup> The Indo-Pacific countries are divided over the utility of AUKUS. Nonetheless, it could supplement the Quad's deterrence against China as another plurilateral tool under the Indo-Pacific Concept, and also permit the Quad to focus on "softer" issues of Indo-Pacific collaboration.

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<sup>47</sup> "Quad Leaders' Joint Statement", Briefing Room, The White House, May 20, 2023. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/05/20/quad-leaders-joint-statement/>

<sup>48</sup> Indo-Pacific Division Brief, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. February 7, 2020. [https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Indo\\_Feb\\_07\\_2020.pdf](https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Indo_Feb_07_2020.pdf)

<sup>49</sup> "US, UK and Australia agree new Indo-Pacific security pact", AlJazeera News, September 15, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/15/uk-and-us-to-help-australia-acquire-nuclear-powered-submarines>

## SOUTH KOREA AND THE INDO-PACIFIC

The Republic of Korea – alike the ASEAN – has always been made to make a hard choice between its economic dependence on China and its security alliance with the US. Seoul has been apprehensive of endorsing the Indo-Pacific Concept, due to fears of antagonising Beijing, which also wields substantial strategic leverage over Pyongyang. Therefore, notwithstanding its New Southern Policy, until 2022, Seoul faced what an analyst described, a “*Hamlet-like dilemma*”.<sup>50</sup> This led South Korea to commission a study by the *Korea Institute for Maritime Strategy* (KIMS), Seoul in 2021 on the relative geo-strategic merits for South Korea of the US Indo-Pacific Strategy versus China’s BRI.<sup>51</sup> Eventually, in December 2022, South Korea released its own Indo-Pacific Strategy titled “Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region”.<sup>52</sup> Whereas it is titled as a “strategy”, unlike the US document, it does not focus on military security, is more like a vision document.

## THIRD INDO-PACIFIC PIVOT: 2022

The outbreak of Russia-Ukraine war in February 2022 may be considered the third watershed event that has transformed the complexion of the Indo-Pacific concept. The potential Russia-China strategic *nexus* and its possible adverse ramifications for the Euro-Atlantic region has caused much anxiety in Europe. These anxieties shared by the US have been aggravated lately by Russia’s emerging strategic collusion with North Korea, which also translates into serious security ramifications for Japan and South Korea.

For first time, four Indo-Pacific States (Australia, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea) attended the 2022 NATO Summit at Madrid, followed by the 2023 NATO Summit in Lithuania. The NATO Strategic Concept adopted during the Madrid Summit mentioned China, also for the first time ever, saying that China’s “stated ambitions and coercive policies challenge our interests, security and values; (it) poses systemic challenges to Euro-Atlantic security; (and its) deepening strategic partnership (with) the Russian Federation and their mutually reinforcing

<sup>50</sup> Chinoy, Sujan R, ‘Seoul and the Indo-Pacific’, *The Indian Express*, August 19, 2020 [online]. Available at: <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/south-korea-foreign-policy-free-and-open-indo-pacific-china-6560347/>

<sup>51</sup> Hayoun Jessie Ryou-Ellison and Gurpreet Khurana, “Indo-Pacific Strategy versus Belt and Road Initiative: Implications for hegemony in Asia”, *해양안보 (Maritime Security)*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 2021, pp. p. 71-123. <https://en.kims.or.kr/maritimesecurity/2-3/>

<sup>52</sup> “Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region”, Press Release, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea, December 28, 2022. [https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m\\_5676/view.do?seq=322133](https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5676/view.do?seq=322133)

attempts to undercut the rules-based international order run counter to our values and interests”.<sup>53</sup>

This has lately led to NATO’s involvement in the affairs of the Indo-Pacific, which is actively supported by Japan and South Korea owing to the growing seriousness of their national security imperatives. On his visit to Tokyo in January 2023, the NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg signed a Joint Declaration with Japan saying that “...the security of the Euro-Atlantic and of the Indo-Pacific is closely connected and stress the necessity of further strengthening cooperation between Japan and NATO”.<sup>54</sup>

As Kelly Grieco argues, extending NATO’s role to the Indo-Pacific region is not only overly ambitious, but also a deviation from the NATO’s charter, and it may be more prudent for the European states to leave the Indo-Pacific space to the US, while Europe continues to engage with the Indo-Pacific states through the E.U.<sup>55</sup> Whether this development is NATO’s “strategic distraction from its core mission” of defending the Euro-Atlantic space is something for the NATO to ponder. From the Indo-Pacific perspective, however, the potential effect of NATO’s role in the region on regional security and stability needs to be considered. Whereas the ASEAN and India have not officially responded to this development, such a role may not be in their interest since it would have a polarising effect in the Indo-Pacific, similar to President Trump’s Indo-Pacific articulation in 2017, leading to the negation of all constructive efforts of the Quad following the second Pivot of the Indo-Pacific Concept in 2021. Even France – a NATO member – has expressed its reservations on the prospects of setting up of a NATO “liaison office” in Japan.<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, it could lead to NATO’s “self-fulfilling prophecy” in its search for relevance and a worthy adversary in a China-Russia-North Korea alliance, which is likely to lead to unintended adverse consequences. The developments following the second Indo-Pacific pivot are only beginning to unfold.

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<sup>53</sup> Madrid Summit Declaration, Press Release, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, June 29, 2022. [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_196951.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_196951.htm) and NATO’s 2022 Strategic Concept, Adopted by Heads of State and Government at the NATO Summit in Madrid, 29 June 2022. <https://www.nato.int/strategic-concept/>

<sup>54</sup> Joint Statement, Issued on the occasion of the meeting between H.E. Mr Jens Stoltenberg, NATO Secretary General and H.E. Mr Kishida Fumio, Prime Minister of Japan, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, January 31, 2023. [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions\\_211294.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_211294.htm)

<sup>55</sup> “Deepen Transatlantic Ties with the European Union—not NATO— To Cooperate in the Indo-Pacific”, *Strategic Realities*, Observatoire géopolitique de l’Indo-Pacifique, Institut de Relations Internationales et Stratégique (IRIS), May 23, 2023. [https://www.iris-france.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/ObsIndoPac\\_Note-4\\_Grieco.pdf](https://www.iris-france.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/ObsIndoPac_Note-4_Grieco.pdf)

<sup>56</sup> “France objects to Nato plan for office in Tokyo”, *Financial Times*, June 5, 2023. <https://www.ft.com/content/204e595f-5e05-4c06-a05e-ffa61e09b27>



## PROGNOSIS

Going by the emerging trends, the Indo-Pacific concept is presently divided amongst the proponents of “hard” Indo-Pacific like the US, the UK and Australia and the proponents of “soft” Indo-Pacific such as the ASEAN and India. The other key players like Japan, South Korea and the European countries tend to switch between the two sides based on circumstances.

The Indo-Pacific concept could witness further transformations, based on which group leads in the tussle between the advocates of “soft” and “hard” Indo-Pacific. If the advocates of the “hard” concept win, a new global “cold war” pivoted in the Indo-Pacific region would be the best-case scenario. A “conventional hot war” through proxy States in the Indo-Pacific region could be the next best scenario. We only can hope that it would not get worse!

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