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Edited by Barbara Kratiuk, Jeroen J. J. Van den Bosch,
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Handbook of Indo-Pacific Studies

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Barbara:

To AK, GK, BK and MK. And to KB. Thank you.

Aleksandra:

To those who are always hungry for knowledge. Use your knowledge to make the world a better place.

Jeroen:

To Zuzanna and new beginnings.

Yoichiro:

To my dear friend, Professor K.V. Kesevan.



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2 Understanding the Indo-Pacific

Geopolitical context

Stefano Pelaggi and Lorenzo Termine

As growing tension between the United States and China agitates Asia, a new analytical framework has gained attention in the study of regional geopolitics: the Indo-Pacific (IP). As formulated thus far, the IP appears a challenging concept for understanding politics and security in Asia for at least three reasons. Firstly, from a geographical standpoint, it is rather ambiguous as it encloses an exceedingly wide region and a still vague number of countries. Combining two geographical regions – the Indian Ocean region and the Pacific Ocean region – the concept has been targeted by harsh criticism of being shallow and pointless for the study of regional politics. Secondly, it includes countries that might not have a historical pattern of amity or enmity such as India and Japan. Since the risk of being dragged into a war with your neighbours is both in geopolitics and in international relations theory the most urgent danger for states' national security and thus the primary shaping factor for their foreign policies, two distant and mutually non-threatening countries are not likely to influence each other's international behaviour. Lastly, it is today a politically-loaded concept reflecting multiple actors' endeavours to frame two security environments together for specific strategic purposes. The IP is the product of an increasingly multipolar regional system where the rise of China appears as the major engine of competition and the main push factor behind regional states' alignment or distancing. Facing such a monumental ascent, different US administrations have advanced the IP as a new security framework serving American interests in Asia. The previous administration led by Donald Trump (2017–2021) has infused new lifeblood to the concept and pioneered a “free and open Indo-Pacific” strategy which pivots on strategic partners such as Japan, Australia and India. The Biden Administration has echoed the same considerations stating that the “ensuring” of “peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific over the long term” (Biden 2021) is crucial to the United States' national security.

Different names, same region? The scholarly birth of the Indo-Pacific

The Indo-Pacific region is still a misconceived geopolitical notion, as it has suffered from several setbacks and misunderstandings. This section will clarify whether the IP is a long-standing concept in the literature on geopolitics or if it has informed the political debate only in more recent times. To address this issue, the section will proceed by first delving into the established works by classical geopoliticians Halford J. Mackinder, Alfred T. Mahan, Karl E. Haushofer and Nicholas J. Spykman.

Before digging into the topic, it must be noted that geopolitics has frequently been a politically-loaded discipline, earning the accusation of being a mere justification of

power politics, expansionism and even – the German and Italian schools of geopolitics – of Nazi-Fascism (See also Box 2.1). Moreover, it is extensively debated whether classical geopolitics can provide a useful lens for today's international politics given its strong Western – European and North America – origin and bias (See also Box 2.2).

The first geopolitical analysis relating to the IP was presented by Halford J. Mackinder who talked of Eurasia as a “continuous land, ice-girt in the north, water-girt elsewhere” spanning between proper Europe and proper Asia. “To east, south, and west of this Heartland” are “marginal regions” which are “accessible to shipmen” (Mackinder 1904: 431). Hence, Mackinder blended India and China together as offshoots of a single continental mass or what he calls “inner (or marginal) crescents” (Mackinder 1904: 435). However, more ambiguously, he explicitly separated the two as land regions, even though they share common climate features such as monsoons, belonging to different civilisations: the former Brahmanist, the latter Buddhist. In contrast, whatever lies beyond the crescents and the seas, such as Japan, Australia, United States, forms the “outer (or insular) crescent.” His concept of IP then entailed a single continental shoreline comprising India and China – even though it is not clear if they formed a single, united region to Mackinder – and an entirely separated area including the archipelagos, islets, and the wide sea and ocean regions around them. No proper IP is thus traceable in Mackinder's work and his reasoning is of no use for understanding the origins of the notion. However, he was the first to devise a certain geopolitical continuity in those littoral regions that he conceived as advantageous to the Western powers and deserves the credit of imagining a merge of two previously divided regions – those dominated by India and China.

The second perspective on the IP was advanced by Alfred T. Mahan, United States Navy captain, strategist and father of the modern geopolitics of the sea, who argued that mastery over the seas and the oceans, which he labelled “Sea Power,” is the cornerstone of the rise and fall of powers in history. For the control of large masses of water, and thus of the lanes of commerce and communication transiting through them, nations fought wars, ascended, or perished. The most pressing factor in the distribution of resources is access to the sea and the capacity to trade outward. Looking at the historical commercial routes in his classic “The Influence of Sea Power Upon History,” Mahan then spoke of the “East Indies” and “Far East” and thus seemingly distinguished the region of India and Southeast Asia from that of China and Japan (Mahan 1965). This is clearly because his is a historical account of Sea Power until 1783 and thus long before the forced opening of China (1842) and Japan (1854) to foreign trade. As a result, Mahan's masterpiece's sections on Asia are strongly focused on the activities of the East India Company and the Seven Years Wars (1756–1763) and thus narrowed to the Indian Ocean as a geostrategic environment per se and the Far East as a separate – not friendly and not even fully disclosed – entity. India as a colony and contested territory at the core of several actors' claims – France and Great Britain – was then the heart of Mahan's depiction of the Indo-Pacific region. Within “The Influence” – it is worth saying – this strong India-centred perspective is confirmed by the almost complete oversight of China and Japan as geopolitical – i.e. sea – actors. Mahan devotes only two mentions to the former and one to the latter while India is named at least 130 times. His Indo-Pacific region would be thus composed of an Indo region, a Far East region and a Pacific region. No trace of a single, geopolitical entity called IP is thus found in Mahan's “The Influence.” However, quite interestingly, Mahan's later work “The Problem of Asia” points at a region spanning between

the possessions of the two major powers – Great Britain and Russia – and thus from Siberia to India. Mahan explicitly contends that “it is no longer consistent with accuracy of forecast to draw a north and south line [in Asia] of severance,” “to contemplate eastern Asia apart from western,” “to dissociate, practically, the conditions and incidents in the one from those in the other” (Mahan 2003: 67). Asia is indeed composed of “living parts” among whom “the relations” – as well as the relationship “to the whole” – must, therefore “be considered.” Mahan even warns that should “the vast mass of China [...] burst her barriers eastward [towards the Pacific]” the “momentous issues dependent upon a firm hold of the Sandwich Islands” would require “a great extension of [US] naval power” (Mahan 2003: 10). This is the understanding of Asia hitherto closest to the contemporary notion of IP since it entails a regional interstate system where interdependence and mutual influence – hence the risk of war (“incidents”) – reign supreme. This is of utmost importance for understanding the roots of the contemporary notion of IP because of the timing of Mahan’s argument in “The Problem of Asia” – right after Japan’s expansion onto the continent at the expense of China (1895) and shortly before Russia’s debacle against Japan (1905) – and with a strong policy-oriented ambition of reorienting US policy towards the region.

Geopolitics as a field of study thrived also in Europe and in particular in Germany where Karl Ernst Haushofer, professor at the University of Munich, was active and put forward a different understanding of Asia, one that is particularly interesting for analysing the roots of the IP. In the 1920s and 1930s, Haushofer was one of the leading theorists behind the study of States as a living organism and researched the entanglement between geography and politics also in that region he labelled as “Indopazifischen” [Indo-Pacific]. This “political living space” was a sea-driven organism because no interaction between the Indian subcontinent (Haushofer 2002: 3), East Asia and the Western Pacific could be possible on land as Tibet and Himalaya were too insurmountable a barrier for human crossing. The Indo-Pacific, on the contrary, was a natural geopolitical unity according to Haushofer because of the binding role of the sea. Furthermore, after having lived in Japan, he thought that the rise of such a powerful country was leading “the Far East opening out into the greater living space [Lebensraum], the Pan-Pacific¹” (Haushofer 2002: 10) which he imagined led by the Japanese Empire. According to Haushofer, the melding of the two oceans – the Indian and the Pacific – provided the Asian country with the most powerful instrument of power, “the arsenal of a Pacific geopolitics” (Haushofer 2002: 35). Haushofer’s IP is then strongly centred on Japan as a rising, expansionist, hegemony-seeking country that had the resources and the spirit to unite politically what the German thinker saw as geographically coherent space. Even though his analysis is not as articulated as Mahan’s, Haushofer deserves the credit of putting forward the first explicit mention of IP in the literature on geopolitics.

Fourth among the fathers of modern geopolitics, Nicholas J. Spykman gave birth to the theory of the Rimland, conventionally opposed to Mackinder’s Heartland. Acknowledging that geography is “the most fundamentally conditioning factor” for states’ conduct (Spykman 1938a: 29), Spykman points at the “world-location” and the “regional location” as sorting factors among nations. States’ localisation and size are the most pressing elements shaping their foreign policy and their perceptions of the strategic environment they operate in. For instance, Japan “lives in deadly fear of a future in which China and Russia” will develop “the power potentials inherent in their gigantic size” (Spykman 1938a: 32) as his insularity no longer provides

“the almost perfect defence it once offered” (Spykman 1938b: 216). The greatest concern for Tokyo is a Russia pushing “southward in search of ice-free ports” towards “Manchuria and Korea,” and a China undergoing “westernization [i.e. development] (Spykman 1938b: 216). East Asia is thus Spykman’s horizon when he writes about China’s and Japan’s foreign policies while a different “world of the Indian Ocean” extends between “the connecting links” of “the Straits of Malacca and the Suez Canal” (Spykman 1938a: 42). For instance, according to Spykman, China’s projection outwards is severely bound both by land as “the Himalayan range blocks the direct way from China to India more effectively than any fortification that man could devise” (Spykman 1938b: 235) and by sea since Beijing is “entirely without a navy” even if it faces “one of the major Sea Powers of the world five hundred miles” away (Spykman 1938b: 222). In conclusion, there is no such single entity as IP in Spykman’s analyses.

As analysed above, among the classical geopoliticians only Karl Haushofer explicitly mentioned the IP as a geopolitical unit. However, his notion of IP is deeply rooted in his appreciation of the Japanese ambitions of expansion and conquest. Conversely, Mahan’s later works addressed the matter in a more comprehensive fashion and with a perspective that suggested that the historical boundaries of Asian geopolitics were about to vanish as Japan’s rise unfolded, the United States gained Hawaii, Guam and the Philippines, global trade reached a peak, and if China was to develop fast in the coming decades.

Box 2.1 The invention of geopolitics: geopoliticians as advisors to the Prince

The origin of geopolitics must be traced to the socio-political context of late-19th century Germany, England and the United States. The new ideas on States’ natural external projection put forward by scholars such as Rudolf Kjellén, Karl Haushofer, Alfred Mahan, Nicholas Spykman and Halford Mackinder often served as a conceptual justification of their State’s power politics. Karl Ernst Haushofer (1869–1946) was a leading proponent of geopolitics and a tragic figure. After a long stay in Japan (1908–1910) as an Army officer, he retired disillusioned after Imperial Germany’s defeat in WWI and dedicated his energies to teach on the Far East and design Germany’s future role in world politics, becoming a principle contributor to Western Academic geopolitical thinking. Later, many of his ideas and theoretical adaptions found themselves written in the racist Nazi worldview. Rudolf Hess was his student and friend, and through him Haushofer actually met Adolf Hitler in 1924, who later applied several of his ideas (like *Lebesraum* – living space) in *Mein Kampf*. Still teaching, Haushofer, refusing to divorce his Jewish wife, had to tread carefully in the new Nazi state: His son was implicated in the 1944 assassination attempt on Hitler and executed by the regime in late 1945. After being accused of collaboration by the Allies, he and his wife committed suicide in 1946 (Herwig 2016; Encyclopaedia Britannica 2020). When it did not take the form of full-blown support for an expansionist, aggressive foreign policy like in the case of Haushofer, the relationship between geopolitics and political power was always unbalanced in favour of the latter. As a naval officer, Mahan’s views were specifically intended to provide the United

States with the right theoretical framework for waging 20th century power politics and, as a result, exerted a great influence over the Assistant Secretary of the Navy – and later US President – Theodore Roosevelt. Karl Haushofer is the example *par excellence* of a geopolitician advising the ruling power as he mentored Hitler's designated successor Rudolf Hess. His ideas of a State's *Lebensraum* (living space) and a German-Japan axis against the Anglo-American hegemony made him the harbinger of the Nazi foreign policy vision. Albeit from a more independent standpoint, even Mackinder's and Spykman's arguments specifically addressed their national security communities and assumed national interests as baselines.

Given the strong political connotation of geopolitical discourse, critics have reasonably argued that geopolitics cannot be considered as an objective social science as it lacks the needed distance between the scholar and the examined subject. Its normative ambition made geopolitics earn the frequent accusation of being the intellectual apparatus for legitimising any sort of ruling power and decision.

Box 2.2 The West-centrism of geopolitics

Geopolitics is indeed a useful tool for examining international politics, but it must not be ignored that it suffers from heavy constraints due to its mostly Western-centric perspective. In fact, in 1987 authors had already noted that "Anglo-American political geography poses and pursues a limited and impoverished version of the discipline, largely ignoring the political concerns of four fifths of humankind" (Perry 1987: 6). From its very foundation, geopolitics was embedded in the European geographical matrix of competing, rivalling, adjacent states (Heffernan 2000). For instance, Karl Haushofer's "living space" (*Lebensraum*), largely shaped after the ideas of his inspirer Friedrich Ratzel, was strictly related to the German experience and fear of encirclement by France, Russia and Great Britain and thus represented the mere "Spatialization of [Germany's] Imperialist Desire" (Ó Tuathail 1996: 35). Similar imperatives gave form also to Mahan's, Mackinder's and Spykman's arguments. This urgency imprinted geopolitics with a strong Western-only bias since the peculiar pattern of international confrontation that had occurred in Europe did not have similarities in other continents or areas. Moreover, the high degree of geopolitics' Westness is also reflected in the usage of concepts and notions such as hegemony, empire, balance of power, integration and assimilation which do not have equals in non-Western political lexicons. For example, in Asia historical Chinese hegemony followed a distinctive and completely different path from e.g., British hegemony during the XIX century or US global hegemony after the end of the Cold War (Zhang 2015).

In reaction to the political (see Box 2.1), Western-centred conception of geopolitics, in the 1980s and 1990s a new debate on the correlation between politics and geography took shape and led to the development of so-called Critical Geopolitics.

According to this strand of literature, geography cannot be considered as a given factor but instead needs to be read as a socially shaped construct. Territory, then, is a causal variable of politics but not in a direct, deterministic manner as intervening elements such as culture, ideology, mindsets and values divert the causal relationship. With specific regards to China, a number of scholars have tried to de-Westernise geopolitics and distillate a more Chinese perspective on the influence of geography on human political actions. For example, a hybrid Confucian view on geopolitics has been advanced as an interesting starting point for eschewing Western preconceptions and biases (An et al. 2020).

The Indo-Pacific century? The rise of China and its implications for regional geopolitics

After 40 years of intensive growth since the start of the “reform and opening” process, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has now been recognised as a great power (Medcalf 2020). From a military point of view, if in 2000 Beijing’s was 3.14% of the world defence spending, in 2010 this number had grown to 7.10% and in 2018 to 14.03% (SIPRI 2020). Similarly, at the dawn of the 21st century, China possessed 3.6% of global GDP while in 2019 it totalled 16.3%. At the same time, Beijing’s share of global exports increased from 3.2% to 10.6% (World Bank 2020). Beijing is also a central diplomatic actor as it enjoys the official recognition of 179 out of the 193 member-countries of the United Nations and actively participates in all the main international organisations and fora, while only a handful of countries have chosen to recognise Taiwan’s Republic of China and renounced relations with the PRC. In a massive effort of cultural diplomacy, the number of Confucius Institutes worldwide reached 541 in 2020 and they offer thousands of Chinese language and culture courses to hundreds of millions of people around the world.

From a regional point of view, the Chinese rise appears even more monumental. If in 2000, the Chinese economy made up 24% of that of neighbouring Japan and was seven times larger than that of Indonesia, in 2019 the gap reached 182 % with Tokyo while Beijing’s GDP is almost 13 times bigger than Jakarta’s. As a result, the relative weight of Chinese output in the East Asia and Pacific region went from 14.6% in 2000 to 53% in 2019 (World Bank 2020)². Similarly, if in 2000, Chinese military spending was 20.3 times greater than Indonesia’s and 12.2 times that of Thailand’s, in 2018 this ratio increased to 33.6 times in the former case and 36.6 times in the latter (SIPRI 2020).

From a geopolitical standpoint, such a tremendous shift in the global and regional distribution of resources has produced crucial consequences.

Firstly, China’s rise has fundamentally altered the balance of power in Asia and has alarmed several neighbouring countries which have started siding with each other to signal cohesion and resolve to Beijing. As a matter of fact, China’s ascent is the main driver behind the formulation of the IP, as it is the common push factor behind alignment or dealignment in Asia. There is little doubt that the United States has arranged much of the regional effort to contain – or at least to shape – China’s rise. In 2012,

for example, Filipino naval forces approached eight Chinese fishing boats operating near the Manila-administered Scarborough Shoal in the South China Sea. Chinese law enforcement ships stood by to protect the fishermen and prompted a Filipino warship to intervene. At the end of this stand-off, which was resolved also by US mediation, Beijing refused to comply with the terms negotiated and retained the Shoal which passed under China's *de facto* control, exerted from then on with constant patrolling activity. Later that year, the Japanese government's purchase of three of the Senkaku islands, hitherto in the hands of Japanese citizens, sparked protests from the PRC which has since increased the number of ships in transit in disputed waters. In response, then US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta felt obliged to reiterate directly to Xi Jinping the US commitment to the defence of Japan, confirmed also by Barack Obama in April 2014 and in the joint Donald Trump-Abe Shinzo press conference in February 2017. In 2017, China and India clashed over control of the Doklam bowl in the most serious military confrontation between the two countries on the border since 1986. India perceived the Chinese effort of enhancing a border road as a way to gain a fait accompli and extend its presence straight into New Delhi's territory. In 2020, a new dangerous military stand-off took place between China and India in Ladakh.

Secondly, the economy is still playing a key role in keeping countries tied together. As one of the most important financial and trading regions of the world, in fact, the IP experiences patterns of interdependence which often have the final word on amity or enmity. Beijing's massive economic build-up has wired the whole region to China and vice versa. Several Asian countries are now deeply embedded in regional and global value chains passing through or stemming from China and are financially tied to the PRC that has often played the role of "lender of last resort." For instance, China's deep economic and commercial penetration into the Philippines is today a strong driver for cooperation – or at least not belligerence – between the two countries. China's economic ascent has massively contributed to a bloated increase in regional trade and sea shipping, multiplying Beijing's over-reliance on sea routes it cannot directly control. For this reason, Beijing is very cautious in challenging the countries around its continental mass and along the sea lanes of communication and the shipping routes that supply China with oil and gas and allow it to trade outwards its massive industrial surplus.

The rise of China, together, of course, with other Asian countries such as India and Vietnam, persuaded several authors that the maritime world "from Africa to Indonesia and then northward to the Korean Peninsula and Japan" was to become "one sweeping continuum." Hence, the geography of "maritime Eurasia" was soon "destined" to become "whole and condensed" (Kaplan 2010: 303). A former United States top official in the State Department put it quite bluntly in 2011: "Asia is being reconnected at last" (Feigenbaum 2011: 25). China's "expanding economic, political and military presence in the Indian Ocean, South Asia, the South Pacific, Africa and beyond" has to be considered then the main trigger of the IP's reconceptualisation and diffusion (Medcalf 2020: 13). The remainder of the chapter will analyse how great powers in maritime Asia have conceptualised the Indo-Pacific and then how China reacted to this notion, whether accepting it – wholly or partially – or rejecting it and proposing an alternative vision. Before tackling the subject, a caveat is needed. Geopolitics has been a Western-centric framework to understand global politics for most of its history and especially classical geopolitics has ignored non-Western perspectives on the relation between politics and geography or spatiality at large (See also Box 2.2). This distortion has been clearly highlighted by the so-called "critical geopolitics," a strand

of geopolitical literature that strived to self-consciously remedy the biased legacies of geopolitics (O'Tuathail 1996).

Convergence in the making: The IP in the strategic discourses of the United States, Japan and India

The Asia-Pacific largely dominated the 20th century – at least from the late 1960s – and the beginning of the 21st. This landscape was roughly understood as “connecting Northeast and Southeast Asia with Oceania (and therefore Australia) and the Americas” (Medcalf 2018a: 16). This denomination implied a US-centred alliance network and regional security architecture which was built from 1945. Featuring less institutionalisation and multilateralism than the European, the US-led order in Asia has mostly followed the pattern of a “hub-and-spoke system” (Ikenberry 2011), i.e. a network of bilateral relations with favoured regional players. During the 20th century, Washington committed to the defence of the Philippines, South Korea and Japan. Moreover, the US-Taiwan relationship is based on a limited but fundamental corpus of treaties and provisions that leaves few doubts about full US military assistance to Taipei in case of escalation or Chinese invasion. Moving beyond its Cold War preference for bilateralism, since 1991 Washington has made steps forward also in supporting multilateral security initiatives in Asia, backing regional institutions such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and its network of organisations as well as the East Asia Summit (EAS), and it has sponsored a revival of a broad-Asian security arrangement called the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue which ties the United States together with Japan, Australia and India. After the end of the Cold War, the United States improved its security relations also with other regional actors such as Thailand, Vietnam, Pakistan, Singapore, India.

However, an explicit mention of the IP did not arrive until the late 2000s. In August 2007, Japanese PM Abe Shinzo visited India and addressed the Indian Parliament. Drawing from the message by an Indian spiritual leader of the XIX century, Abe Shinzo envisioned the future “confluence of the two seas” – the Pacific and the Indian Oceans. This confluence was pushing Tokyo and New Delhi to build an “Arc of Freedom and Prosperity” in what he labelled “broader Asia,” a macro-region including also the United States and Australia and built around Japan-India strategic partnership and alignment. The total range of issues Japan and India were agreeing to cooperate on was broad: defence, economics, diplomacy, development, technology, education, energy, environment, culture and others. Even while not yet mentioning the IP, Abe’s remarks provided many cues that later were integrated into the notion. Since 2007, the notion of the IP has slowly been brought to the forefront of political and strategic discourse by several actors in Asia even if sometimes with remarkable differences. Hereafter, the different interpretations of the IP by the United States, Japan and India will be outlined. For the sake of clarity, due to word length limits, no examination of other middle powers has been carried out here (See also Box 2.4 for more).

The United States

During the 1980s and the 1990s US strategic documents and officials often referred to the “Pacific Rim” and the 21st century as the “Pacific Century.” The Pacific Ocean was

to be the future highway of prosperity and development. Throughout the history of US foreign policy after the Cold War, a dramatic rift is acknowledged to have occurred in 2011–2012 when the Obama Administration advanced the so-called “Rebalance” or “Pivot” to Asia. Even though a “pivot before the Pivot” had already been outlined but never carried out by the Bush Jr. Administration due to 9/11 and the War on Terror, it was Barack Obama who pioneered such a strategic rebalance towards Asia. Explaining this new vision in her 2011 pivotal article on America’s forthcoming Pacific century, Hillary Clinton mentioned the IP with regards to Washington’s alliance with Australia writing that from a strictly Pacific region, it was to become an Indo-Pacific one (Clinton 2011). In 2011 the US Senate Committee on Armed Services also claimed that US-India joint “naval exercises have become a vital pillar of stability, security and free and open trade, in the Indo-Pacific region” (US Senate 2011: 211). In 2012, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia Kurt Campbell spoke of a “linkage between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific” whose grasping and conceptualising was the “challenge of the next phase of American strategy” (Campbell 2012).

In 2017, the new Administration led by Donald Trump brought about some noteworthy changes to US foreign policy towards the PRC and led the White House to a steep turn towards a US approach to the IP. More specifically, after Donald Trump’s first trip to Asia in November 2017, the IP started to take shape as the geopolitical and conceptual backbone of US security and strategic involvement in Asia. According to the *2018 National Defense Strategy*, in fact, “long term strategic competition” between powers has re-emerged as the principal threat to US national security (Department of Defense 2018: 2) since – the *2017 National Security Strategy* choruses – China – together with Russia – threatens to challenge “American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity” (White House 2017: 2). In short, China must be considered a “strategic competitor” and a “revisionist power” as it is promoting a worldview utterly “antithetical” to US values and interests (White House 2017: 25). In particular, in the “Indo-Pacific” China is seeking “regional hegemony in the near-term and displacement of the United States” (Department of Defense 2018: 2). Each subsequent strategic and operational document released by the Trump Administration since the National Security Strategy (i.e. *2018 Nuclear Posture Review; 2018 Design for Maintaining Maritime Superiority 2.0; 2019 Missile Defense Review*) has echoed those conclusions. In May 2018, the US Pacific military command was symbolically renamed the Indo-Pacific Command in recognition of the greater emphasis on South Asia, especially India, and consistent with the new strategy. Between 2019 and 2020 several strategic documents were released: the Department of Defense’s *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report*, later the Department of State’s *A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision*, and lastly the White House’s *United States Strategic Approach to The People’s Republic of China*. In each document, the United States promoted a full-fledged “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” strategy based on some main pillars: “fair,” “reciprocal” trade relations based on principles such as respect for intellectual property rights, free trade, protection of private property, fair competition and open markets. In addition, the United States is pursuing preparedness of its Armed Forces, security partnerships and the promotion of a networked region in the IP. For instance, the US support for Taiwan is a representative case of the US presence in the IP (See also Box 2.3 for more). The Biden Administration has reaffirmed the IP as the centre of US “national interests [...] deepest connection” (White House 2021: 10).

From a geopolitical perspective, the analysis of each of these documents highlights the US perspective on the IP. First of all, the American IP is a rather Asian and Australasian IP including most of the Indian Region, South East Asia, North East Asia, the whole Pacific Ocean and Australasia. Its military command's area of responsibility – the INDOPACOM of the US Armed Forces – confirms this vista and then excludes the Western Indian Ocean, Africa's east coast, the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, the Persian Gulf, and the Arabian Sea, the responsibility of AFRICOM and CENTCOM. In 2015 a naval strategic document clarified that the IP was gaining increasing importance and comprises "Australia, Japan, New Zealand, the Philippines, the Republic of Korea, Thailand, Bangladesh, Brunei, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Micronesia, Pakistan, Singapore, and Vietnam" (Department of the Navy 2015: 3). In this light, the US understanding of the IP resembles both Mahan's and Haushofer's points of view on the region because it has a strong maritime focus and thus it is mainly centred on those littoral states influencing the freedom of navigation in the area.

Box 2.3 Taiwan: edge of the Indo-Pacific?

The strategic position of Taiwan and its role, practically unique in the world, as an autonomous entity within the international community, represents an interesting case study for understanding the geopolitical dynamics of the Indo-Pacific. The island lays in the Taiwan Strait which is one of the most important shipping channels in the world linking major economies such as China, Japan, South Korea, Southeast Asia and India. The position of the island at the intersection of all the main hubs of the region, 160 km east from China, 250 km from the Philippines, just over 1000 km from the island of Hainan and 1400 km from the Spratly Islands, constitutes an indispensable pivot for control of the Asia-Pacific and Taiwan represents an indispensable strategic node for the United States in the South China Sea.

Taiwan can be defined as a medium power, being the 20th-largest in the world by purchasing power parity and is one of the countries at the forefront of technological innovation, a world leader in the semiconductor sector. However, Taiwan's international projection is extremely limited by the coercion of the People's Republic of China which claims sovereignty over the Taiwanese territory. Nevertheless, the geostrategic balance does not allow the PRC to exert force and reclaim the Taiwanese territory due to Washington's support. Sino-Taiwanese relations (Cross Strait Relation) remain, in the interpretation of Alan Romberg, "the only problem in the world today that could realistically lead to war between two great powers" (Kastner 2018). The 2017 National Security Strategy confirmed the US commitment to economic and strategic competition with the Chinese rival. The document assumes a central role for Taiwan in the IP region and in the dispute with the People's Republic of China and, thus, Taiwan best represents the new assertive US role in the IP, a pledge to free trade, open markets and the defence of democratic rights.

Japan

The first designer of the IP, Japan, however, took time before detailing a clear vision for it. Mostly linked to the political success of Abe Shinzo, the IP was thus paused between 2007 and 2012 when he returned to the Kantei for his second term as Japanese Prime Minister.

In December 2012, Abe Shinzo authored an op-ed in the magazine *Project Syndicate* and proposed the creation of a “democratic security diamond” in the IP. In his opinion, Japan, the United States, India and Australia were supposed to “safeguard the maritime commons stretching from the Indian Ocean region to the western Pacific,” defend the existing regional order, and tackle China’s growing assertiveness (Shinzo 2012). This concept of a “security diamond” was the logical heir of the 2007 “confluence of the seas” speech and represented its advancement (Pugliese & Patalano 2020).

In 2016, the Japanese premier formally launched his “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” strategy during the Sixth International Conference on African Development in Kenya. Japan – he stated – felt the responsibility of “fostering the confluence of the Pacific and Indian Oceans” and of “Asia and Africa” under the guiding principles of “freedom, rule of law, and the market economy,” freeing it from “force or coercion,” and making it “prosperous” (Shinzo 2016). Since then, this strategy began to take a more concrete form by channelling a huge flow of resources and capital, leading multilateral security partnerships and drills, and taking part in others’ initiatives in the region. One of the first, rudimentary projects within this new IP focus was the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement, a trade agreement aimed to deepen economic ties, slashing tariffs, fostering trade to boost growth, sharing policies and regulation, that after several setbacks and modifications – not least the withdrawal of the United States – entered into force on 30 December 2018. From August to October 2018, Tokyo then deployed three warships in the South China Sea for a joint military exercise with five IP countries and the United States. The Japanese vessels made port calls in India, Sri Lanka, Singapore, Indonesia and the Philippines and during the exercise linked up with the US Navy in the disputed territorial waters of the South China Sea with a submarine and other warships, including the *Kaga* carrier.

From a geopolitical point of view, Japan’s IP is twofold. On one hand, its security dimension is enclosed in the “diamond” and it easily overlaps with that of the United States. Tokyo, New Delhi, Canberra and Washington are identified as the main pillars of security and stability in the IP, and are the foundations for the confluence of the seas. On the other, its economic side is much more multifaceted. If we look at Japan’s bilateral economic cooperation and partnerships since then, we see that Tokyo’s diplomatic activism has been truly bicontinental, stretching from Asia to East Africa and promoting commercial and financial integration between the two sides of the Indian Ocean, across South and East Asia, and the Pacific. This is arguably related to Japan’s deep reliance on Africa-East Asia and Middle East-East Asia sea routes. For example, 90 percent of Tokyo’s oil imports are shipped from the Middle East and/or Africa through the Indian Ocean. The African trajectory of Japan’s economic IP is completely unique as it is absent from US blueprints.

India

Considered one of the most important rising countries and member of the BRICS during the 1990s and the 2000s, India has been re-orienting its security and defence policy

during the 2010s and under the government of Narendra Modi, leader of the nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party. In particular, China's rise has been the major motive behind India's declining affection for BRICS and multilateral cooperation led by Beijing. New Delhi is in fact suspicious of its bulky neighbour. Modi's foreign policy has mainly been concerned by China's assertiveness with regard to border disagreements (Aksai Chin, Arunachal Pradesh and indirectly Doklam), by its growing trade and defence relationships with India's surrounding countries and primarily archenemy Pakistan, and by the expansion of the Chinese naval presence in the Indian Ocean, where New Delhi worries of encirclement. In 2013, a military stalemate trapped India and China in Depsang and in 2017 India was alarmed by Chinese movements across the Sino-Bhutanese Doklam border and felt pressured to intervene on Bhutan's side. The following dangerous military stand-off lasted for weeks but the two countries managed to maintain peace and there no reported casualties. Still in 2017, India also declared its non-participation in China's massive infrastructural Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Initial hesitations then became open opposition to BRI when Delhi refused to attend, at any level, the BRI international forum in Beijing and aimed to showcase supporting countries. Major concerns for New Delhi regarding BRI revolve around the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, which starts in China but crosses Delhi-claimed but Islamabad-controlled Kashmir. Predictably enough, India is highly uneasy about the Chinese purchase of the Pakistani Gwadar port which – New Delhi fears – could be easily turned into a military outpost and encircle the subcontinent. Quite interestingly instead, New Delhi expressed anxiety about the Chinese military base in Djibouti at the tip of the Horn of Africa.

Since 2014 Narendra Modi's government has extended the security dimension of the traditional Indian "Look East" policy to a newly established "Act East" policy. This blueprint is configured as a series of connectivity plans – both maritime and land – aimed at intensifying commercial relations with, first, Myanmar, the Bay of Bengal and Southeast Asia and then with East Asia and the Pacific Region. Constant engagement at bilateral, regional and multilateral levels are then the pillars of the "Act East" policy. Japan is regarded as one of the major partners in India's foreign policy. With Tokyo, for instance, New Delhi has launched the vision of the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor, which is not only economic but above all strategic, as it aims to replace China's BRI in Africa. The Arab Gulf nations – especially Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates – are also central to India's West outreach because, besides energy, they occupy strategic location for India's maritime security and commercial interests.

Another cornerstone of Modi's foreign policy has been India's leaning towards the United States. In January 2015, the *US-India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region* reflected India's concern about the tension over the South China Sea, shaking off the long Indian silence on Chinese expansionism in the maritime sphere. This was one of the first steps in Indian alignment with the United States which has been deepened since. In June 2016, the United States recognised India as a "Major Defense Partner," pledging to facilitate the sharing of technologies on a par with its closest partners and allies. In 2019, Australia, India, Japan and the United States met for the first time as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue group, or Quad.

Geographically speaking, India's IP is peculiar. According to the *2016 India's Maritime Security Strategy* national interests and linkages "have expanded" over the years, "from the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal, to the Indian Ocean region, thence across the Indo-Pacific Region" (Ministry of Defence 2016: 30). According to

the document, crucial national interests to India are located across the *Indian Ocean Region* (emphasis added) which is enclosed between the Cape of Good Hope, the Suez Canal and the Gulf of Aden, the Malacca, Sunda and Lombok Straits, and the Western coast of Australia. As noted later by India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, cooperation under the Indo-Pacific umbrella has been hampered by a problem of incongruence. "Building partnerships in the Indo-Pacific maritime region" is difficult due to "the lack of consensus on what such a concept meant or even its geographic extent" (The Hindu 2019). Because of this difference in strategic vistas, the US Navy's cooperation with the Indian navy was limited to the eastern part of the Indo-Pacific region – US Seventh Fleet's and INDOPACOM's area of responsibility – whereas at the Western end, where many of India's vital interests lie, India-US military cooperation is negligible. However, at the 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue, Modi explicitly endorsed the "shared vision of an open, stable, secure and prosperous *Indo-Pacific Region* (emphasis added)," a wider geopolitical region than previously referenced. Nonetheless, Modi was rather impatient to dismiss any anti-China understanding of the IP, which, in his words, is no means a vision "directed against any country" or advanced by who "seeks to dominate" (Modi 2018). From then on, India has been quite eager to promote the concept of the IP but fell short in defining the differences between the IP and Indian Ocean region. In a fit of bluntness, India's 2019 National Security admitted that the US "Indo-Pacific strategy" is meant "to contain China in East and Southeast Asia" (Hooda 2019: 3) but that there are still many "divergent definitions" of the IP that "should be harmonised as a priority" (Hooda 2019: 8).

Asia for Asians: China's geopolitical landscape facing containment

In October 2012, Wang Jisi, a prominent Chinese international relations scholar and formerly a top advisor to President Hu Jintao, delivered an important speech outlining how China should react to the Pivot to Asia. In his opinion, China had to follow the principle of "Marching Westward" as the United States was rebalancing toward the Asia-Pacific. The "March Westward" imperative is generally regarded as the baseline for the following major development in China's geopolitical projection: the Belt and Road Initiative. During his visit to the Nazarbayev University of Kazakhstan at the start of a Central Asian tour, President Xi Jinping proposed to build an "economic belt along the Silk Road" (Xi 2013a). In October 2013 before the Indonesian Parliament, Xi Jinping expanded the project, foreseeing also a "Maritime Silk Road of the 21st century" (Xi 2013b). After returning from the tour, Xi Jinping held the first work conference – attended by the whole Politburo and the highest cadres from the diplomatic, economic and military sectors – on "Peripheral Diplomacy" where he advocated the need of ensuring stability around and closer ties with Western neighbours. To this purpose, BRI involves the development of basic infrastructure along six major land corridors towards the west – the Economic Belt – and the expansion of sea routes – the Maritime Road – connecting China with South Asia, Africa and Europe. Since the unveiling of BRI, then, scholars have wondered whether China's purpose was to regain its historical continental geopolitical projection and eschew confrontation at sea where it knew the cards were not stacked in its favour. However, as soon as the Belt and Road project started to unfurl, it was clear that it had a significant maritime projection in Asia. The Maritime Silk Road entailed ports and facilities among others in Pakistan, Myanmar, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Brunei, the Maldives and Djibouti all

along the sea route to Africa and the Mediterranean. On 1 August 2017, China opened its first overseas military base in Djibouti in the Strait of Bab el-Mandeb at the opening of the Red Sea and between 2018 and 2019 a second outpost in Tajikistan close to the Afghan border.

In 2015, China's *Military Strategy* claimed that the crucial "geostrategic landscape" for Beijing's national interest was the "Asia-Pacific." In November 2017, after Trump's first tour in Asia and initial hints regarding the IP, a Chinese MFA spokesperson stated that "politicized and exclusionary [regional visions and proposals] should be avoided." However, the Chinese official did not completely reject the IP but argued that whatever vision is to be implemented – "be it the Asia-Pacific or others" – it "shall heed the call of the times for peaceful development" and foster "win-win cooperation" (Geng 2017). Possibly because of the tones of Washington's December 2017 National Security Strategy and January 2018 National Defense Strategy, in March 2018, short before the IP gained consensus at the Shangri-La Dialogue, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi dismissed the "Indo-Pacific" as "an attention-grabbing idea" that would "dissipate like ocean foam" (ABC 2018). China is still reluctant to employ the concept as it perceives the IP as a non-neutral geopolitical landscape. Accordingly, in its 2019 White Paper on Defence, Beijing continues using "Asia-Pacific" to describe the geographical region where its interests are located. Stubbornly, Chinese officials have persisted "in referring to the 'Asia-Pacific region' even when they are responding to questions concerning the IP" (Feng 2020: 16). Interestingly, the US-Japan-India divergences over the boundaries of the IP are seen by Chinese scholars as a "weakness" of the coalition (Heiduk & Wacker 2020: 32). Nevertheless, in the 2019 white paper the PRC recognised that in time "the Asia-Pacific has become a focus of major country competition" (PRC SCIO 2019: 6).

No matter how it is responding rhetorically to the diffusion of the IP as a geopolitical region, China is in fact an Indo-Pacific power. Its massive economic and military build-up has made China a strong outward-looking country both for interests and challenges. For instance, China's need of the mastery over the South China Sea for its anti-access/area denial strategy aimed at offsetting potential rivals' military superiority has alarmed many South East Asian states such as Vietnam, Philippines and Brunei and dragged it into a tense stalemate where Washington is signalling resolve to defend the status quo. Moreover, Beijing's energy security is greatly dependent on supplies from the Middle East and Angola. Almost 80% of China's energy imports transit through Malacca in what former President Hu Jintao defined the "Malacca dilemma," the over-reliance on chokepoints China cannot control directly. China's historical and recent antagonism with India and amity with Pakistan is further evidence that Beijing has a strong security connection with the subcontinent also via land. China's trade relation with the major Anglophone powers in the Pacific – the United States, Australia and New Zealand – drags it towards the Ocean. The history of the Maritime Silk Road is further evidence of the Indo-Pacific nature of China's geopolitical projection. In 2017, a white paper stated that the purpose of the Road was to realise the "China-Indian Ocean-Africa-Mediterranean Sea Blue Economic Passage," to link "the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean" through the "China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor," to connect the "China-Pakistan Economic Corridor" and the "Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor." Moreover, efforts will also be made to build the "blue economic passage of China-Oceania-South Pacific, travelling southward from the South China Sea into the Pacific Ocean" (Xinhua 2017).

However, there is a major difference between China's interpretation – even if not explicit – of the IP and others': the absence of the United States. Responding to the new diplomatic activism in Obama's Pivot to Asia in the 2010s, China advanced the New Asian Security Concept (NASC), an architecture proposal for regional security and the only proposal of a Chinese-designed security institution. Initially mentioned by Premier Li Keqiang during the 2013 East Asia Summit and later relaunched by Xi Jinping in 2014, the NASC is meant to let the "people of Asia run the affairs of Asia, solve the problems of Asia, and uphold the security of Asia" (Xi Jinping 2014: 392). This proposal has been interpreted as challenging the security order backed by the United States in the IP as it is inspired by the Chinese long-standing mantra that security should be based not on "outmoded Cold War alliances and military blocs" (Larson & Shevchenko 2010: 82). China's intent, then, is to "establish a security architecture that is more exclusively "Asian," free of alliances, more attendant to its domestic security concerns, less liberal, and solidly rooted in Chinese economic power" (Ford 2020: 1). The Chinese IP would be then US-less and, according to many, increasingly Sino-centric (Gungwu 2013).

Box 2.4 Australia and Canada

The geopolitical framework of the IP has also gained attention in the political debate of middle powers such as Australia and Canada. Australian and Canadian commentators and politicians have expressed the need for their countries to be increasingly involved in Asian security and economic arrangements.

Australia has always been interested in Asia's security and economic dynamics. Given its geographical location at the opening of the wide Asian seas and continental mass, Canberra is greatly impacted by the cooperation-competition patterns in the region. Since 2013, and thus preceding the United States, Australia has leaned towards the new notion of the Indo-Pacific proposed first by Japan and has adopted it in official documents. The Australian Defence White Paper of 2013 mentioned the concept 56 times and even devoted an entire chapter to it. The usage is echoed also in the Defence White Paper of 2016 and the Foreign Policy White Paper of 2017. It is not just a matter of semantics. Australia has demonstrated a strong resolve to pursue the US-Japan-sponsored view of the Indo-Pacific and its security and economic implications. Thus, Canberra «views East and South Asia as an interconnected geopolitical space» where the Australian security and economic interests are increasingly dwarfed by China's monumental rise (Medcalf 2018b: 133).

Canada, for its part, was not always concerned about the dynamics affecting the Indo-Pacific region's security and economy. However, as the Asian economy grew and seized the largest share in the global GDP and commerce, Ottawa began looking at the region with increasing interest. Nonetheless, Canada long refrained from adopting the term, signalling a more cautious stance on China than the United States. The only relevant debate on Canada and the Indo-Pacific took place in January 2020 when the Canadian Asia-Pacific Foundation gathered numerous speakers from Australia, Canada, China, India, Indonesia, Japan and the United States to present their views on the idea of Indo-Pacific. The

roundtable was concluded by Jeffrey Reeves, Vice-President of the Foundation. Reeves argued that Canada should continue ignoring the Indo-Pacific geographic construct and prioritising the “Asia-Pacific” which leaves ample space for Ottawa to pursue its strategic interests. The strong anti-China rhetoric behind the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” is, in Reeves’ opinion, too constraining for Canada (Reeves 2020). Ottawa’s reluctance to endorse the Indo-Pacific framework was confirmed again in 2020 when the Canadian Government issued a statement on “Canada and the *Asia-Pacific*” (emphasis added) and made no mention of the merging of the Indian and the Pacific regions (Government of Canada 2020).

Conclusion

Before dwelling on the findings of the chapter, omissions call for clarification. In the chapter no space has been given to regional middle powers’ formulations or reactions to the rise of IP as a geopolitical horizon (see also Box 2.4). This is mainly because we have decided to focus on great powers’ geopolitical competition. We are aware though that middle powers – both advocates and opponents of the concept – play a crucial role in international politics and in shaping the IP as the case of Australia clearly demonstrates. Canberra is indeed one of the leading middle powers advancing the IP and an in-depth analysis of its understanding would have proved useful to understand regional geopolitics. Moreover, no room has been left for non-regional powers – e.g. European – that are contributing to the ascent of the IP in political discourse. For instance, the United Kingdom, France and Germany are participating in the definition of the IP, its boundaries, challenges and actors.

The chapter has summarised several crucial facets when we deal with the Indo-Pacific from a geopolitical approach. First, the IP is a geopolitical landscape that still need a conclusive definition. It has been outlined – more or less explicitly – by two of the four major geopoliticians, namely Alfred T. Mahan and Karl E. Haushofer who clearly linked the emergence of this mega-region to the development of trade and navigation, the former, or the rise of an expansionist power, the latter. However, a clear-cut geopolitical perimeter was not set. Second, it is in the political – better strategic – domain that the recent origins of the IP must be traced. In particular, it was China’s ascent on the regional stage during the 1990s and the 2000s that pushed the United States, Japan and India among others to feel the urgency of a new conceptualisation of Asia. Japan first, the United States and India later then started reconfiguring the geopolitical horizon of their regional policies in order to check Beijing’s rise. Nonetheless, the three have not yet devised a single understanding of the IP but rather they are advancing different extensions of the concept. For instance, Japan and India, given their over-reliance on the Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Aden share a common African-Middle Eastern trajectory in their views on the IP whereas the United States puts forward a more Pacific-centric IP. Third, the lowest common denominator between the three visions is their strong maritime – very Mahanian – orientation of the IP. The notion of the IP in fact revolves around sea routes and navigation because the three powers feel that the worst-case scenario would be China threatening their national security interests by enjoying dominance

over the seas: the East China Sea for Tokyo, the Indian Ocean for New Delhi, the whole of maritime Asia for Washington. Fourth, the chapter found that Beijing has not surprisingly perceived the IP as a politically charged concept and thus has refrained from not only endorsing but even mentioning it. Instead, China has doggedly kept on advancing the landscape of the Asia-Pacific in speeches and white papers. Lastly, the chapter argues that even though China is eschewing the IP as a geopolitical landscape, the IP is still real for its national interest. China is in fact an Indo-Pacific power because its economic, energy, political and security interests lie in the Indo-Pacific. Furthermore, China is expected to be increasingly an Indo-Pacific power because *rebus sic stantibus* the coalition the United States is forming to keep China in check spans across the Indo-Pacific region, uniting Australasia, East Asia, the Pacific and the Indian Ocean.

Notes

- 1 Quite confusingly, Haushofer also uses the term “Pan-Asia” extensively to describe Japan’s natural sphere of influence.
- 2 World Bank taxonomy.

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