

The Emergence of the Indo-Pacific: Geopolitical Turn or Continuity?

Written by Marie Kwon

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MARIE KWON, APR 11 2023

On 20 March 2023, Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida announced a \$75 billion plan for a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" dedicated to maintaining peace and ensuring cooperation and connectivity in the Indo-Pacific region. The plan, revealed in New Delhi, echoed Kishida's predecessor Shinzo Abe's landmark address to the Indian Parliament in 2007, which was the first public defence of a strategic confluence of the Indian and Pacific Oceans. The conceptual merging of the two oceanic spaces was, at the time of its introduction, understood to reflect the material political and economic convergences that brought the region's leading powers, namely India and Japan, closer together. This speech paved the way for the later release of Japan's vision for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific in 2016 but it also kickstarted the coming into being of the Indo-Pacific as both a geographical notion and geopolitical vision.

Despite the prevalence of the Indo-Pacific in global policy discourses, the emergence of the terminology is endogenous to the region itself. Japan and India were the first to call for greater convergence in the face of common security concerns across the regional space, thereby introducing a novel form of Asian identity expressed by Shinzo Abe as "broader Asia." However, grasping the meaning of the Indo-Pacific has since become deeply ambiguous. There is scant consensus as to the region's geographical scope, and the contestation around the terminology demonstrates the eagerness of certain state actors to shape the new regional framework according to their national interests. Interpretations of the region's extent are indeed numerous, some locate the region as stretching from the Eastern coast of Africa to the Americas, others exclude the Eastern flank of the Indian Ocean, while Beijing rejects the term completely in what appears to be an effort to denounce anti-China bloc politics. These competing definitions and ensuing diverging policy approaches have further reinforced the complexity of the Indo-Pacific debate in both policy and academic discourses. But exactly what has led to the rapid popularisation of the Indo-Pacific? What does the term have to do with broader discourses on geopolitics? And what impact will it have on international relations theory? This article intends to reflect on these questions as a way of clarifying the debate surrounding Indo-Pacific studies.

Is the emergence of the Indo-Pacific construct purely notional? How concretely does the term relate to shifting dynamics in the region? The evolution of the spatial construct is notable because it has allowed for an appreciation of the strong economic expansion of the region as well as a recognition of significant changes to Asia's security architecture. It is paramount to highlight that prior to the colonial period, the space today referred to as the Indo-Pacific revolved primarily around two civilizational centres: China and India. This changed as the colonial system led to the end of Chinese and Indian influence over their neighbours and to a fragmentation of the region. The existing regional fabric was then further altered from the turn of the 20th century onwards with the emergence of Japan as an imperial power, until the end of the Cold War which in the region was synonymous with the tumult of decolonization movements, civil wars, and extreme forms of political violence. Today, a new rendering of the space has surfaced due to new developments in the region, namely the rise of China, the advent of India and Japan as "middle powers," and the consolidation of the U.S. presence in the region.

The traction behind the change of terminology is twofold. First, it proceeds from shared interests to safeguard the maritime interconnectedness of the resource-rich region which allowed it to become the new economic centre of the world. Second, a major underpinning of the construction of the Indo-Pacific is the terminology's direct recognition of

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the growing importance of India whose emergence as an economic powerhouse and leading security actor in ways that reflect old facets of the region, which the previously dominant “Asia-Pacific” term failed to echo. In this context, the meaning of this shift, far from merely reflecting a change of geographical reference, will continue to evolve as regional and extra-regional actors will it into existence. The symbolic renaming of the US Pacific Command as the US Indo-Pacific Command in 2018, for instance, was a clear policy demonstration of Washington’s adherence to the term. In the last few years, European countries notably France, which has projected itself as a local Indo-Pacific power, have developed their respective policies on the Indo-Pacific. Subsequently, the European Union published its own strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific in 2021. The successive publication of numerous policy documents referring to this new spatial construct are clearly demonstrative of the centrality of the Indo-Pacific notion for geopolitical thinking and indicative of the materialisation of the term’s conceptual legitimacy.

The concept of “geopolitics” itself is contested. By and large it refers to the central influence of the “objective geographical reality” on the conduct of international relations. According to classical geopolitics which closely relates to realist political thought, the need for states to exert influence over territories to maximise their position in the international system, is the primary source of conflict e.g. First and Second World Wars. Today, similar analyses stressing the geopolitical nature of world politics are resurfacing. As war rages in Ukraine and the consequences of the adversarial relationship between the U.S. States and China are being felt across the globe, there is growing acceptance that we are quickly moving away from the post-Cold War “U.S.-led liberal international order,” and are returning to an age of geopolitics. Quite strikingly, it is primarily these realist and classical geopolitical considerations that are progressively dictating the meaning of the Indo-Pacific construct. The emphasis on great power competition in Indo-Pacific discourses are increasingly overtaking the concept’s initial overtones of greater pan-regional cooperation. Consequently, while a critical geopolitical analysis of the Indo-Pacific would draw attention to the power relations supported by this spatial representation, all indications rather point to an assimilation of the Indo-Pacific to the classical geopolitical lexicon and in this sense, the term carries significant potential for regional and global conflict.

In accordance with the popularisation of the terminology in its classical geopolitical sense, it can be argued that the Indo-Pacific’s accepted meaning is the product of a perceived power transition in the Asia-Pacific region and in its neighbouring spaces. Although the Indo-Pacific overlaps with the concept of the Asia-Pacific, the two regional constructs are not identical in their political meanings as a result of history. Asia-Pacific represented a space in which economic prosperity and security assurances were inherently connected. Indo-Pacific, to the contrary, refers to a conceptual dichotomization of the economic-security nexus. In the Indo-Pacific era, several countries are having to find an equilibrium between their economic reliance on China and dependence on the U.S. for security provisions. It could be argued that the overwhelming context of tensions between Washington and Beijing has swayed the political relevance of the new Indo-Pacific descriptor and infused its meaning with objectives to fight or maintain the current status quo. Regardless of the adequacy of the comparison, the currently prevailing sense of geopolitical urgency has at times been equated to the risk of “a new Cold War.” In that sense, it has been argued that one of the key reasons for the traction of the Indo-Pacific notion lies in a widespread scrutinization of China’s assertiveness across the Indian and Pacific Oceans, notably by the US. In other words, the China factor is the Indo-Pacific’s elephant in the room.

At the same time, the heterogeneity of Indo-Pacific definitions demonstrates how the popularisation of the term far from presupposes an alignment of visions for the regional order at all. Considering this, the emergence of the Indo-Pacific as a spatial phenomenon is likely to revive older international relations debates on power relations. The literature on critical geopolitics, a subfield of political geography, reminds us how spatial representations underlie power relations. Bearing this in mind, the emergence of the Indo-Pacific construct will not escape the rule. In fact, increasing references to the Indo-Pacific have emerged in unison with a sharp increase in references to classical geopolitics in international relations. The conflation of the Indo-Pacific as a geographical reference and strategic vehicle reveals a thread of continuity in the way spatialised knowledge remains caught in the conceptual shadow of classical geopolitics.

In conclusion, the impact of the popularisation of the Indo-Pacific is dual in nature. With regards to policy, the merging of the Indian and Pacific Oceans and the conceptual expansion of the regional imagination signals the start

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of a new phase of Asia-related foreign policies. Second, at a normative level, the Indo-Pacific as a value-loaded spatial reference is not simply descriptive of changing dynamics in the region but carries significant transformative properties both positive and negative. Furthermore, it exemplifies the value-laden character of spatial references, notably, the long-standing securitization of regionalism. In this vein, it is crucial to apprehend the shift from the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific in relation to the historical and intellectual contexts from which it emerged, and hence, as the product of both old and new connections. Overall, it can be argued that while the Indo-Pacific construct does present new ways for thinking about Asia, it does not manifest fresh approaches for thinking about space.

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