



Asia-Pacific vs. Indio-Pacific: Just Different Words or Different Visions for a Region?

Dr. Manuel Vermeer

December 2018

Abstract

Starting with the use by US officials, the term Indo-Pacific seems to have succeeded in replacing the older Asia-Pacific. This is not only a linguistic twist, but rather a new view on the region, particularly the Indian Ocean and the growing importance of India in the maritime concept, stretching from East Africa to the Pacific. The dependence on China goes along with a growing fear, so all the littoral countries seem to be in favor of the new concept. Because this is what it is, a concept, an idea, nothing more so far. But it shows a shift in economic as well as political focus from the Far East (Japan) to China and now to India. The Indian Ocean is the ocean of the 21st century.

About ISPSW

The Institute for Strategic, Political, Security and Economic Consultancy (ISPSW) is a private institute for research and consultancy. The ISPSW is an objective, task-oriented and politically non-partisan institute.

In the increasingly complex international environment of globalized economic processes and worldwide political, ecological, social and cultural change, which occasions both major opportunities and risks, decision-makers in the economic and political arena depend more than ever before on the advice of highly qualified experts.

ISPSW offers a range of services, including strategic analyses, security consultancy, executive coaching and intercultural competency. ISPSW publications examine a wide range of topics connected with politics, the economy, international relations, and security/ defense. ISPSW network experts have held – in some cases for decades – executive positions and dispose over a wide range of experience in their respective fields of



Analysis

“What’s in a name? A rose by any other name smells just the same”!

Shakespeare

Beautifully said, but in diplomacy, a name can mean a lot of things. And therefore America’s use of the phrase “Indo-Pacific” as opposed to “Asia-Pacific” deserves our attention and definitely should be discussed in the broader view of the main powers involved.

The term Asia-Pacific was coined after the Second World War; after the devastating events in Europe the economic as well as security links between the United States and East Asia had to be redefined und strengthened. India wasn’t excluded by purpose, but rather the notion of a closer tie between Asia and the US just didn’t expand to the shores of the Arabian Sea.

President Trump’s trip to Asia in November 2017 really brought the new term “Indo-Pacific” to the world stage, though some people state other politicians like Japan’s premier Shinzo Abe or the US secretary of State Hillary Clinton already had used the phrase years earlier. Both the president’s speech as well as comments made by his National Security Adviser and Secretary of State pointed to a new and different emphasis in redefining Asia’s diplomatic geography. Trump in his visit to China referred to the Indo-Pacific. The US Defense Secretary, James Mattis, used the term ‘Indo-Pacific’ 17 times in his speech, and ‘Asia-Pacific’ only once during his speech at the Shangri-La dialogue in Singapore, after coming from Hawaii and renaming the US Pacific Command into [Indo-Pacific Command](#)¹! The year before, Mattis had used ‘Asia-Pacific’ nine times and ‘Indo-Pacific’ only once. And this is the difference between Shakespeare’s quote and diplomacy: There is a lot in a name!

Why is the use of this phrase important? Maybe this is the reason: The Indo-Pacific is a [maritime concept while the Asia-Pacific tries to link](#)² the maritime with the continental.

The Asia-Pacific has three major constituents: north-east Asia, south-east Asia and Oceania (South Western Pacific). India is not a part of the region. The Indo-Pacific, on the other hand, is an integrated concept that combines the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, and the land masses that surround them. It is both a strategic as well as an economic domain comprising important sea-lines of communication that connect the littorals of the two oceans. Since it is primarily a maritime space, the Indo-Pacific is associated with maritime security and cooperation. Indo-Pacific skips by the Asian land mass (China) and replaces it with two oceans.

The translation into nations therefore can read Indo = India while Pacific = US.

China naturally prefers Asia-Pacific because it references the land mass that China thinks it naturally dominates, plus the ocean that stretches to the US (and the South China Sea, the area seen by China as its own!).

On the other hand, Asia-Pacific translates to: Asia = China while Pacific = US

¹ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-defense-india/in-symbolic-nod-to-india-us-pacific-command-changes-name-idUSKCN1IV2Q2>

² <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/indo-pacific-maritime-continental/>



Let's have a look at two old views of geography and strategy: [John Mackinder](#)³ versus [Alfred Mahan](#)⁴.

The land element of the Asia-Pacific and the Chinese view of their world favors Mackinder's theory about the Eurasian landmass that dominates the world. Mackinder would understand and appreciate the importance and ambition of China's so-called New Silkroad (also known as BIR - Belt and Road Initiative - or OBOR, One Belt One Road) for the Eurasian heartland.

Chinese diplomats referring to the disputed South or East China Seas insist on these seas being China's seas. That they always have been, are and always will be Chinese. It's their right to build new islands, military outposts etc. But actually they don't have any local or international power to share this view; it is China that is enforcing its power and its rights in these waters. But the Chinese love the idea of the Centre. China is called Zhongguo in Chinese, meaning "Middle Kingdom", surrounded by barbarian countries, not even cultures. In the concept of Indo-Pacific, on the other hand, India is central, not China. US naval officer Alfred Mahan therefore would happily support the two-ocean expression of the Indo-Pacific.

If the US and the rest of the world continue using the term 'Indo-Pacific' instead of 'Asia-Pacific', China's hegemony in this region loses credibility and even legitimacy. Along with this reduction of Chinese "face", it automatically gives "face" to India, as India lies in the center of the then newly defined "Indo-Pacific"!

What are the region's major player's views on the term Indo-Pacific?

Australia favored the term 'Indo-Pacific' from the start, viewing it as better representing its #s understanding of the region. Australian economy is heavily dependent on China, but this is exactly why it likes the idea of strengthening India.

Japan's Shinzo Abe prefers the 'Indo-Pacific' because it suits his visions of a more important Japanese role in Asia. Of course he would like anything that in some way or the other curbs Chinese interest in the region. 'Indo-Pacific' is a big idea that reaches beyond the bilateralism of the US-East Asia alliance.

India embraces the Indo-Pacific because it honors India's vital role in Asia's future.

Indonesia sits in the middle of the newly defined Indo-Pacific, and therefore prefers this term, though not openly voicing it.

So what is the view of the nation which has started the discussion by using the term repeatedly, as we have seen – the United States? Donald Trump likes a new label that doesn't belong to Obama; this might be the main issue he is interested in and all he needs. In view of the US-China trade war and its implications (as of December 2018) anything annoying China is fine.

China's response to the Indo-Pacific trend is far more sophisticated. In first sight, China of course doesn't like the idea of Indo-Pacific for the above mentioned reasons. On the other side, it's just that, only an idea, a concept. So far, nothing really impressive has resulted from the changing of the wording, so China might be happy quoting Shakespeare! Why bother what the US says? Anything China has to fear in terms of economic consequences?

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Geographical_Pivot_of_History

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfred_Thayer_Mahan



Economic implications

Besides the wording, let's not forget the possible economic implications of an Indo-Pacific view of the region. There might be a new focus on trans-regional economic corridors between South and Southeast Asia.

I won't get into details regarding the economic importance of the region and especially the Street of Malacca for oil and gas transport, as the reader would be more than aware of the situation. Among the various trans-regional economic corridors in the region, the Indo-Pacific Economic Corridor is still at a very nascent stage. The very conception of the Indo-Pacific Economic Corridor can be traced to the US-India Strategic Dialogue of 2013, where Secretary of State John Kerry referred to the potential of the Indo-Pacific Economic Corridor.

The idea of Indo-Pacific includes the coastal areas of South Asia and therefore is a critical shift because this links the Indian Ocean, the Bay of Bengal and the Straits of Malacca, Sundah and Lombok into a single strategic unit. Conventional thinking saw South, Southeast and East Asia as three distinct sub-units of the Asian continent. However, the Indo-Pacific context becomes more relevant while looking at the region as a singular unit given that nearly 55% of the world's container trade travels through this region. More, nearly 70% of ship borne energy transport moves through these waters.

The importance of the Indo-Pacific Economic Corridor may also be seen in the light of developments and political changes in the region. Myanmar e.g. lies at the pivot of both South and Southeast Asia, thereby acting as a critical link between these two regions and furthermore being the more important than ever connection between India and Southeast Asia. Part of Chinas Belt and Road Initiative are China's interests in avoiding the critical Strait of Malacca and building a direct link through Myanmar. Also the existing Greater Mekong Sub-region is planned to be linked up to Myanmar through the expansion of the East West Corridor from the port of Da Nang in Vietnam through Laos and Thailand to Myanmar. The 1,320 kilometer link will basically connect two points in the Indian and the Pacific oceans – namely Mawlamyine on the Western coast of Myanmar on the Andaman sea (Indian Ocean) and Da Nang on the Eastern coast of Vietnam on the South China Sea (Pacific Ocean).

Of course we see many challenges to the Indo-Pacific Economic Corridor. The overall cost of establishing connectivity through roads, railways, maritime port and energy trading for linking South and Southeast Asia may add up to US\$ 73 billion, according to a recent ADB study. And all this depends on the role India will take in this newly envisioned Indo-Pacific. The northeastern region of India has to be considered in its role as a critical connection between India and South East Asia. Plans to construct a road between Kolkata and Ho Chih Minh city - nearly 4430 kilometers – would give access to all the mainland countries in Southeast Asia. For the Indo-Pacific Economic Corridor to be effective the impetus to complete pending projects must be instituted from both the Indian and the ASEAN sides.

Smart Islands

In a meeting just weeks ago, India's Modi and Japan's Abe identified the need to develop smart islands in India. Given Delhi's renewed focus on developing its Andaman and Nicobar Islands, it is safe to note that smart islands might refer to joint collaborations in these islands.

Andaman and Nicobar Islands are located close to all the entry points into the Indian Ocean. These islands could be a real game changer, as the Indian Navy's ability to operate in areas further away from the Indian mainland would be significantly enhanced. The strategic importance of these islands of course has been well



known to Modi's government, but obviously there are significant challenges in developing them. In November an American missionary was allegedly killed when trying to illegally enter the island of North Sentinel. The local tribe is said to be completely secluded and any encounter with the outer world could be deadly, if only for reasons of contamination with unknown bacteria. There is also a need to considerably upgrade the infrastructure and digital connectivity. Japan is already collaborating with India in terms of infrastructure, digitalization and more. So from Stone Age to smart islands?

Only a strategic and economic ecosystem as varied as this will be able to accommodate the Indo-Pacific's diverse faces.

BRI

China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is aiming at more than 64 countries, from East Asia to Africa and Europa, but its 'centre of gravity' will definitely lie within the Asia-Pacific region. The majority of its projects such as dam building, road building, residential construction and high speed railway construction take place within China's southern and western neighbors' territories.

Up to now, the 'Asia-Pacific' idea has achieved a lot. The 'Indo-Pacific' hasn't even started.

Conclusion

There is, of course, no such thing as the Indo-Pacific. Like the Asia-Pacific, or Asia itself, the Indo-Pacific is simply an idea, a concept, a way for governments to frame the international environment to suit their policy objectives in particular circumstances. Its [growing use](#)⁵ reflects the impact of China's rise (and the growing fear in the region). And perhaps also the more general westwards re-weighting of power within Asia — from Japan to China, from the Chinese coast to the Western provinces and then to India.

Indo-Pacific is an idea that captures the shift in power and influence from the so-called West to the so-called East. Be it energy supply, infrastructure or security connections, be it state or non-state, this idea links the Middle East, West Asia and East Asia.

But there is no overall concept as to what Indo-Pacific means or encompasses. Each country has its own 'Indo-Pacific'. And it is not an exclusive concept, as it will also help China to expand its influence in the Indian Ocean. As can be seen by the so-called "string of pearls", Beijing's interests lie here, in the Indian Ocean. This is possibly why China has not expressed any resentment of the Indo-Pacific, at least not explicitly. In Indo-Pacific, there will be cooperation and competition, there will be China in the center and ASEAN or even India in the center. Everything is possible, nothing fixed.

Essential to the idea of Indo-Pacific is the growing eminence of India. Even though the "Indo" in "Indo-Pacific" represents the Indian Ocean and not India, the world expects India to play a significant role.

The long-prevalent "Asia-Pacific" construct was inadequate and ambiguous in terms of incorporating India in the affairs of the region. It is interesting to evaluate the use of the words 'free and open' in both their Indo-Pacific and Asia-Pacific contexts. While in the Asia-Pacific, the words have a definite economic focus (free and

⁵ <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2013/10/10/the-indo-pacific-whats-in-a-name/>



open trade and investment etc.), the Indo-Pacific relates to political systems and has an implied normative sense of ‘more democratic’.

Chinese president Xi Jinping likes to quote Confucius. When Confucius was asked what he would do as an emperor, according to the Analects chapter 13 he said it is most important to rectify the names (‘zheng ming’). Words have to correspond to reality. Therefore, with my apologies to Mr. Shakespeare, there is a lot in a name. Nomen est omen, which is Latin for “The name depicts the fate, the name is the omen.” I love to read Shakespeare, but in this case, Indo-Pacific vs. Asia-Pacific, the Latin proverb is more to the point. There is a lot in a name.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

About the Author of this Issue

Dr. Manuel Vermeer, born from a German father and an Indian mother, lived and studied in China as early as 1982. Since more than 25 years he has been one of Germany’s leading consultants for doing business in China and India. He published several articles and three books on the topic. Moreover, Dr. Vermeer published Germany’s first Tibet thriller in 2015, „Mit dem Wasser kommt der Tod“, describing the water crisis in Tibet and a potential war between China and India by means of a suspense thriller. His second thriller was published in 2017, his third in 2018.

He teaches Business Chinese and Intercultural Management at the East Asia Institute, Ludwigshafen (Germany). His extensive experience as a middleman for foreign companies in China and India has helped many clients in solving their problems. Several guest lectures at universities in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Spain, Denmark, India, China. Interviews in leading German radio stations and newspapers; TV report in Spiegel TV (Germany) and on Deutsche Welle (broadcast worldwide in 2007). Languages: German, English, Chinese, Spanish, French.



Dr. Manuel Vermeer