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When two seas become one battlefield between China and the US

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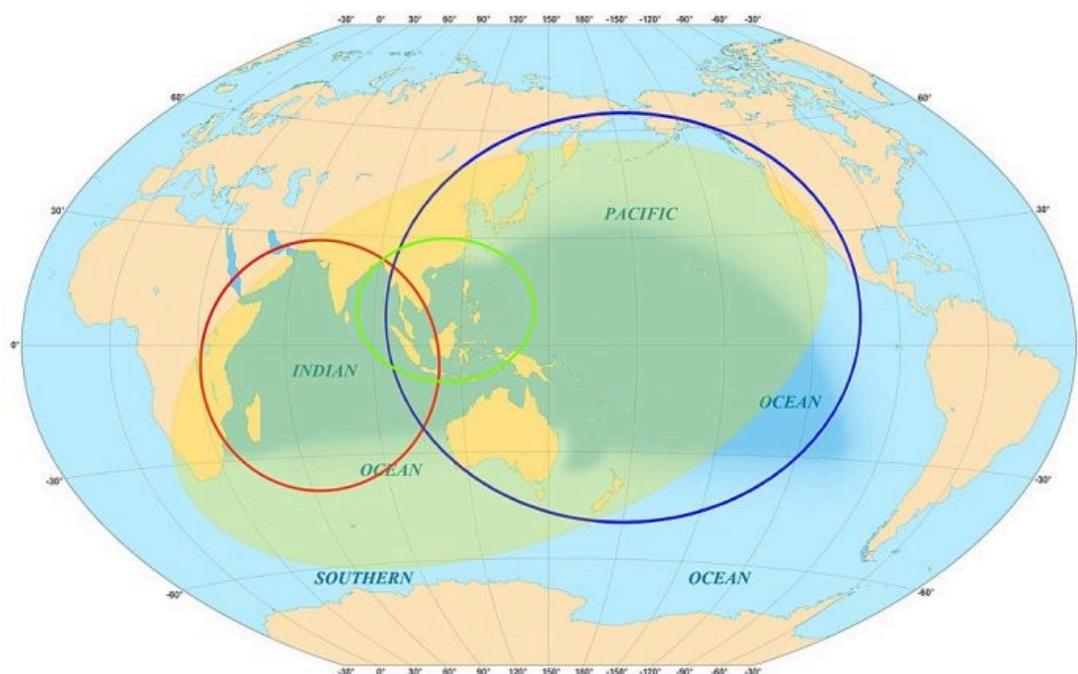


Illustration showing how the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean are understood as one strategically connected area. Photo: Wikimedia Commons, November 4, 2020.

The transition from the geographical term “Asia-Pacific” to “Indo-Pacific” is more than a semantic redefinition of the map. It represents a fundamental reshaping of the global strategic architecture.

In the decades following World War II, the Asia-Pacific framework served as the operating system for a liberal, US-led order characterized by economic integration and a security system built around so-called “hub-and-spoke” alliances. It was a cartography of convenience that artificially separated the Indian Ocean from the Pacific: the former was treated as a mere logistical corridor, the latter as the primary arena for the exercise of power. As the center of gravity of the world economy shifted and the maritime domains of the two oceans became operationally inseparable, this framework became inadequate.

The emergence of the Indo-Pacific as the dominant strategic concept of the 21st century was not originally the result of great power rivalry. As historical analysis of the region

shows, it began as a recognition of ecological and historical coherence—a “convergence of two oceans” long before it became a site of containment [1]. However, ideas evolve when they encounter power. Although the concept had its roots in scientific observation and anti-colonial imagination, its modern consolidation is driven by the sharpening strategic competition between the United States and the People’s Republic of China (hereafter China). Today, the Indo-Pacific is shaped by a complex confluence of security dilemmas related to Taiwan, sea lines of communication (SLOCs), industrial policy, and the race for technological superiority. This is not, however, a simple narrative of American hegemony versus Chinese revisionism—both actors can be described as revisionist. Rather, it is a complex dynamic in which middle powers such as Japan and India act as crucial moderators, navigating a persistent global bipolarity, which is increasingly burdened by regional multipolarity.

For India, the shift from “Asia-Pacific” to “Indo-Pacific” was more than a semantic shift; it represented a structural upgrade from geopolitical periphery to conceptual core of the regional order. India had long stood outside the Asia-Pacific framework, which placed Japan at the center, but gradually and consciously embraced the Indo-Pacific in recognition of its maritime geography, economic clout, and civilizational connections across the Indian Ocean. This shift was startling, given India’s strong tradition of non-alignment since independence and its clear opposition to bloc politics.

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Rather than entering into a formal alliance, New Delhi redefined its engagement as voluntary and interest-based, anchored in strategic autonomy. This was clearly expressed through mechanisms such as the Quad – marking a redefinition of alignment without giving up autonomy. For Japan, the Indo-Pacific concept, in turn, implied a western expansion of its strategic horizon. Tokyo could thus reduce its exclusive dependence on the US-centric Asia-Pacific order while developing India as a balancing partner. In this convergence, India’s response was not a break with historical restraint but a further development of it: a calibrated entry into a flexible, norms-based coalition architecture that was not bound by treaties but nevertheless signaled a willingness to shape – rather than merely observe – the emerging regional order.

The Archaeology of an Idea: From Biogeography to Geopolitics

To understand the current strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific, one must recognize that the intellectual roots of the concept were originally detached from the logic of containment that characterizes it today. As highlighted in the basic literature, the term first emerged in 19th-century natural science. Naturalists such as Alfred Russel Wallace identified an “Indo-Pacific” biogeographical region where marine species migrated freely between East Africa and the central Pacific, regardless of the imperial boundaries drawn by European powers.



It was the German geographer Karl Haushofer who politicized this scientific entity in the interwar period. In works such as *Geopolitik des Pazifischen Ozeans*, he described the Indo-Pacific as an anti-colonial "living space" (Lebensraum) that could counteract Western dominance, and argued that the separation of the oceans was a fiction created by British imperial administration. Although Haushofer's vision was compromised by his association with German expansionism, his fundamental insight – that the monsoon winds and ocean currents created one organic whole – was prescient. For many of today's supporters of the Indo-Pacific concept, this now appears almost self-evident.

During the Cold War, the concept lay dormant, buried under the rigid alliance architecture of the Asia-Pacific. It was revived in the 21st century—not primarily by American hawks but by Asian strategists who recognized changing economic realities. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's 2007 speech to the Indian parliament on the "convergence of the two oceans" provided the political impetus, while Indian analyst Shyam Saran articulated the strategic logic: India's economic rise had expanded its interests eastward, while China's energy needs were pulling it westward. When US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton formally adopted the term in 2010, it was presented as an inclusive recognition of India's rise and the need to secure global commons. The Indo-Pacific thus began as a functional geography—a map drawn by energy flows, container ships, and the strategic logic of connectivity.

The Great Distortion: When Rivalries Merge

If increased connectivity created the Indo-Pacific as a geopolitical concept, rivalry has militarized it. The seemingly harmonious logic of economic integration that characterized the Asia-Pacific era has collapsed under the weight of China's rise and the US's counterattack. We are now witnessing a sweeping convergence in which previously separate issues – maritime security, Taiwan's sovereignty, semiconductor supply chains, and the transition to green energy – have merged into a single, high-stakes struggle for dominance.

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China's rejection of the Indo-Pacific concept and the Quad cooperation as "sea foam" or a containment project reveals a deep strategic unease [2]. The framework legitimizes a balancing coalition that weakens Beijing's central position in the region. Paradoxically, China's own actions have operationalized the very geography Beijing seeks to deny. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the militarization of the South China Sea, and the establishment of naval bases in the Indian Ocean—such as in Djibouti—have forced neighboring countries to view the two oceans as a single security complex. As Kurt Campbell and Rush Doshi point out in their article in *Foreign Affairs*, China's size is its primary tool of power: its shipbuilding capacity is 200 times greater than that of the United States, and China dominates the processing of critical minerals. The material



reality forces the United States to view the Indo-Pacific not just as a trade route but as a strategic survival space.

The United States, for its part – particularly under the Trump administration’s America First doctrine, as articulated in the 2026 National Security Strategy (NSS) – has abandoned post-war universalist ambitions in favor of a more hard-line and transactional realism. The NSS explicitly enshrines the principle of “peace through strength” and introduces a “Trump Amendment” to the Monroe Doctrine. It marks a shift from trying to shape China to deterring it. The strategy is based on a sharp strengthening of the defense industrial base and on the requirement that allies bear the costs of their own security. The result is an exclusion zone that is intended to contain Chinese influence, transforming the Indo-Pacific from an arena of open cooperation into a bipolar battlefield.

The tipping point of the middle powers: Moderation in a bipolar world

The binary logic of the US-China rivalry often obscures the decisive power of the middle powers. The Indo-Pacific is not just a chessboard for superpowers; it is a region characterized by states that refuse to be reduced to pieces. Japan, India, Australia and the ASEAN countries act as key driving forces. They seek to mitigate the security dilemma while safeguarding their own strategic survival interests.

Japan is emerging as the architect of the modern Indo-Pacific. Tokyo’s vision of a “free and open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP) predates the US commitment and places greater emphasis on the rule of law, norms and infrastructure than on mere containment. By anchoring the US in the region while maintaining economic engagement with China, Japan acts as a stabilizing actor. At the same time, recent analyses of Japanese strategy documents show that Tokyo increasingly perceives a potential Taiwan crisis as an “existential threat.” This is driving rapid remilitarization—a shift that further complicates the region’s fragile balance of power.

India’s role is equally complex. As Ashley Tellis argues in her article “India’s Great-Power Delusions” in *Foreign Affairs*, New Delhi’s ambitions often exceed its actual capacity. India seeks a multipolar world order in which it itself constitutes an independent pole. The country rejects formal alliances with the United States, while in practice relying on Washington to balance Beijing. India’s strategic autonomy allows it to cooperate with the United States on critical technologies (iCET), while maintaining energy links with Russia and actively participating in the BRICS forum. This frustrates American ambitions to establish a NATO-like structure in Asia, but at the same time acts as a necessary pressure valve. India’s refusal to become a vassal power ensures that the Indo-Pacific does not develop into a purely American-dominated maritime domain.

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This reluctance to take sides is particularly evident in Southeast Asia. ISEAS [3] surveys show that the region sees the United States as a necessary security guarantor, but China as an irreplaceable economic engine. The “ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific” therefore appears as a defensive strategy – an attempt to adapt and tame the concept to prevent the region from being torn apart by great-power rivalry. These middle powers contribute to what can be described as a “limited multipolarity”. They cannot replace American power, but they can influence how it is exercised – often by opposing the most aggressive impulses of American disengagement or Chinese pressure.

Persistent bipolarity and the fragile superpowers

Despite the multipolar ambitions of New Delhi and Paris, the structural reality of the world order remains largely bipolar. As Stephen Nagy argues in “The Enduring Bipolarity,” the world is in an interregnum marked by a rivalry that neither side fully controls. The indicators of combined power—economic clout, military reach, and technological innovation—place the United States and China in a category of their own. Russia has been reduced to a junior partner in an authoritarian axis, while Europe is characterized by strategic ambiguity and economic stagnation.

At the same time, this bipolarity is more fragile than it appears. Both superpowers are struggling with deep internal structural challenges. China is facing a “Wang Huning moment” of its own making. In his monograph *America vs. America*, Wang predicted American collapse as a result of internal chaos. Today, however, it is China that is confronted with stagnation, driven by demographic decline, a crisis in the real estate sector, and an authoritarian form of government that inhibits innovation. As Rana Mitter points out in her essay “The Once and Future China,” Beijing’s window of opportunity to establish regional hegemony is closing. This creates a dangerous paradox: A China at the peak of its power may become more risk-averse and thus willing to escalate—for example, over Taiwan or in the South China Sea—to secure external gains before its domestic momentum weakens.

The United States, for its part, faces a different kind of vulnerability under a Trumpian paradigm. The 2026 National Security Strategy marks a clear shift toward transactional diplomacy and more aggressive unilateralism. Demanding increased burden-sharing from allies like Japan and South Korea may be fiscally rational, but it also risks undermining the trust on which the entire American alliance network rests. As Emma Ashford points out in “Making Multipolarity Work,” aggressive unilateralism can create uncertainty among allies about whether the United States is a reliable partner or an unpredictable actor. If Washington begins to treat allies as tributaries rather than equal partners—by demanding payment for protection while simultaneously erecting tariff barriers—it could drive countries in the global south toward a non-aligned neutrality that will ultimately strengthen Beijing’s position.

Back to the future

The development of the Indo-Pacific has in reality gone in circles. The region was first understood as a naturally connected space, where trade, shipping and political contact linked the coasts. This connection was broken by the division and dominance of the great powers. Today it has been reborn – driven by the weight of great power rivalry. We are facing a “back to the future” scenario with Chinese characteristics: a return to a pre-modern Asian maritime dynamic, but now overshadowed by the unstable logic of nuclear deterrence and algorithmic warfare.

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The current stability in the Indo-Pacific rests on a delicate and finely tuned balance. It presupposes a sustained bipolar power structure between the United States and China to prevent chaos, while relying on an emerging multipolarity among regional middle powers to avert war. The risk lies in the domestic political vulnerability of the major powers. If China’s economic decline forces the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to seek new legitimacy through nationalism, or if political polarization in the United States leads to weakened or withdrawn security guarantees, the region could fragment again.

Ultimately, the course of the Indo-Pacific will not be determined by quantitative indicators such as gross domestic product (GDP) or the number of naval vessels alone, but by the ability of the United States to transform its transactional power into lasting and credible leadership. At a time when the United States does not dominate the region alone, and when China cannot be fully disengaged from it, the future will belong to those who manage to maintain the most robust network of willing partners. In this turbulent interlude, policymakers should note a fundamental insight about influence in a contested world order:

“Power is capacity, sustainability is choice; in the vast Indo-Pacific, the former can be secured by force, the latter only by friends.”

Endnotes

[1] For a deeper intellectual genealogy, several studies suggest that Abe borrowed the phrase from the 17th-century Persian work *Majma‘-ul-Bahrain* (The Confluence of the Two Oceans), written by the Mughal prince Dara Shikoh. The work aimed to unite Sufi Islam and Hindu Vedanta. The reference to Dara Shikoh is now widespread in analyses of Japan’s Indo-Pacific vision and in the secondary literature on Abe’s “Confluence of the Two Seas” concept. See: Monika Chansoria, “Japan’s Confluence of the Two Seas Conception: The Influence of Mughal Prince Dara Shikoh’s 1655 Text ‘Majma‘-ul-Bahrain’ [The Mingling of the Two Oceans]”, *Japan Review* 6, no. 1 (2023): 31–39, https://www.jiia.or.jp/eng/upload/eng/03JapanReview_Vol6_No1_Monika%20Chansoria.pdf

[2] Khan highlights in detail the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) long-standing fear of regime change and containment. See: Khan, Sulmaan Wasif. *Haunted by Chaos: China’s*

Grand Strategy from Mao Zedong to Xi Jinping. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018.

[3] ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute is a leading research institute in Singapore dedicated to studying socio-political, security and economic trends in Southeast Asia.



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