

Article

The “Indo-Pacific”: Regional Dynamics in the 21st Century’s New Geopolitical Center of Gravity

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Abstract

As the United States’ titular position in the international system is seemingly in retreat, questions regarding the efficacy of the post-World War II liberal order have surfaced. In this emerging multipolar world, two distinct constellations of power are forming. In one camp are states that largely support the current global governance structure; in the other, states that wish to upend or at least refashion the American-led structure that many say favors status-quo powers over rising states. Nowhere is this division more apparent than in the “Indo-Pacific.” As this article shows, the Indo-Pacific is increasingly used by governments and leaders as a central organizing idea around which choices are made about their position in the future global order. Although, as a concept, the Indo-Pacific means, and *will* mean, different things to different people, the number of nascent state strategies tethered to this neologism indicates the term’s powerful salience. Under the banner “Free and Open Indo-Pacific,” these strategies are crafted in response to the general “threat” of a China-dominated world and evince a shift in the position of certain state actors is underway; from causal adherence or outright disinterest in upholding the U.S. post-War global governance structure to one of increasing support.

Keywords

Indo-Pacific, Belt and Road Initiative, Global Governance, Balance of Power, Rising Powers

Global Shifts and the Indo-Pacific

During the five or so decades of the Cold War, the United States (U.S.) and the Soviet Union – despite being ideological and geostrategic foes – attempted to define an international system that included structures and laws that formed the basis of today’s post-World War II global governance. With the demise of the Soviet Union, this bipolar world passed and an era of American unipolarity ensued that for some heralded a second “American century” (Krauthammer 1990; El-Doufani 1992; Zuckerman 1998). However, the era of U.S. hegemony with its emphasis on a liberal global order appears to have been relatively brief, and the longevity of both the Cold War structures of global governance and those of America’s “unipolar decade” were increasingly questioned by the middle of the last decade (Blyth 2007; Layne 2012). First and foremost among the voices calling for alternatives or an outright overthrow of the existing structures were the so-called “rising powers” of Brazil, China and Russia, as well as Mexico, South Africa, Turkey, Nigeria, Indonesia and others.

Questioning the status quo has continued apace, bolstered by the emergence over the past two decades of a gradual but robust shift in economic power and resources from West to East with a much more modest shift towards the Global South (Posen 2009). What does all this mean to the post-World War II global governance system? This new multipolar world – for all of its inconsistencies and unknowns – seems to be forming into distinct constellations of power: states that support the current global governance structure or states that wish to upend or at least refashion the post-War structure with its perceived or real inequalities and inequities that favor status-quo powers over rising powers (Florini 2011; Terhalle 2011; Stephen 2012; Breslin 2010; Dal & Gök 2014; Newman & Zalle 2018).¹ This may be a neat typology, but it hardly addresses the complexity of what we are experiencing. For example, if India is a rising power why has it signaled its interest – admittedly unevenly – in joining status quo powers such as Japan and the U.S. to thwart a rising China? Or why would Malaysia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and a plethora of smaller but nonetheless rising powers, economically speaking, throw their lot in with a former and possibly resurgent global hegemon? Alternatively, states such as Kenya and the Philippines seem to be able to hedge and play interested states against one another.

Various international relations theories make answers to these simple conundrums appear easy, albeit contested depending on the school of thought. Yet the term “Indo-Pacific” as bandied about by statespersons and stakeholders from U.S.

¹ For example, according to Emel Parlar Dal and Gonca O. Gök (2014, 5-6), Turkey under President Erdogan has championed the so-called “Ankara criteria”. This gives precedence to a uniquely Turkish vision of international relations seeking to reform an international system which Turkey sees as unjust, unequal, undemocratic and excessively militarized. Importantly, Turkey’s challenging posture within the international order is also linked to its ascendancy to the club of “rising powers.”

President Donald Trump to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and the nascent strategy or strategies tethered to that term, is becoming increasingly the currency whereby individuals and states understand and make choices about the merits of an unknown, unclear but different global order as embodied by China, and a global order led by the U.S., Japan and other great powers that is well known but not particularly well liked. The fact that the order is not principally well liked does not mean that it has or will continue to be used and abused by what can be loosely termed rising and status quo powers. This is the case for Nigeria as well as Turkey, two rising powers that arguably chafe under the existing geopolitical and geoeconomic order but nonetheless use it because a better alternative does not exist ... yet.

The fact that references as well as some concrete moves have been made towards what appear to be the beginnings of a new or at least post-U.S. global order – as embodied by a rising China – has had the arguable effect of increasing the salience of the issue for states that fear or mistrust (or both) a China-dominated world (Pan 2014; Breslin 2017; Allison 2017). It is under this general “threat” that the positions of state actors have arguably begun to visibly shift from casual adherence or outright disinterest in upholding of the post-War global governance structure to one of increasing support. This shift is apparent in normative statements made by leaders about the “rule of law” or “sea lane safety,” and has led increasingly to a constellation of hard and soft power and thereby the beginnings of strategy that includes one great power (the United States), one economic power (Japan), one rising power (India) and one lynchpin power (Australia). These four states, spread across the globe with very different sources of, and outlooks on, power now form the nucleus of what Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has nominated a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP) strategy (Abe 2016).

This special issue of *Rising Powers Quarterly* was in part stimulated by the ever-increasing use of this nomenclature by diplomats, policy-makers, leaders such as Prime Minister Abe, and scholars. Yet what the term actually means is unclear. If the term is unclear, the nascent strategies tacked on to the term are even more uncertain and therefore ripe for closer scrutiny.

Indo-Pacific-size Confusion

For many people in foreign policy circles, the term Indo-Pacific denotes a new spatially coherent zone combining the Pacific and Indian Oceans. An intensification of economic activity and the heightening of geopolitical competition within this vast maritime area are thought to provide the *raison d'être* for conceptualizing the Indo-Pacific as a distinct (albeit yet-to-be delineated) region. Under this view, the new geopolitical realities of the twenty-first century – especially the rise of India and China – are best captured by thinking of these two oceans, the islands

they contain and the countries that line their littoral, in the whole (Mohan 2012). This interpretation, however, is far from universally accepted. Indeed, some academics make the claim that this neologism (the Indo-Pacific) is little more than a discursive construction, the roots of which lie in anxieties in some capitals about China's growing power and influence (Cheng 2008; Manicom & O'Neil 2010; Pan 2014). Rather than a natural byproduct of global power and wealth shifting from the Atlantic zone eastward, the term Indo-Pacific, they argue, has been imagined and subsequently evoked to provide a concept around which a strategic response to China's rise can be organized (De Castro 2017; Pant & Reg 2018; Green 2018; Medcalf 2018; Soong 2018).

Debates around the utility or even the ontological basis of the Indo-Pacific concept will no doubt continue for some time; the Indo-Pacific means and *will* mean different things to different people. Nonetheless, policies taken by the main actors in the region – states and elite decision-makers in these states – will also have a powerful constitutive effect in shaping what the Indo-Pacific comes to look like. The dynamism of the region, specifically the aggregated rate of economic growth taking place and the concomitant share of world power that comes with this, means the Indo-Pacific is undergoing rapid transformation. Whilst the Indo-Pacific's broad trajectory points ineluctably to it acquiring increasing importance in world affairs, it is nonetheless difficult to anticipate what the consequences will be for the international relations of the region. Will the Indo-Pacific emerge as a zone of intense contestation between established and rising powers? If contestation is likely to be a key feature of the region, what form will it take? How will small and medium powers navigate through these challenging times? Analyzing recent developments will not lead to clear answers to these questions, but it may help us anticipate the direction the region is heading in. This is why the timing of this special issue of *Rising Powers Quarterly* is so crucial.

To date, much of the burgeoning literature and political commentary on the Indo-Pacific has focused overwhelmingly on the shifting balance of power between Washington and Beijing and what this means for the region (Tao 2017; Shirk 2017). Whilst these great power dynamics are a key feature of the region, they are far from the full story. Less attention has been given over, for example, to how other states in the Indo-Pacific are responding to the opportunities and challenges brought about by seismic transformations occurring in the region. A central objective – if not *the* central objective – of this special issue is to widen the debate about the Indo-Pacific by injecting a much broader set of perspectives and approaches into current discussions. To that end, it has sought to include a wide set of geographically and thematically diverse contributions.

One Power against Many

The issue opens with David Scott's thorough account of U.S. balancing actions. By cataloguing diplomatic initiatives and words, Scott argues that Washington's Indo-Pacific policy has essentially entailed co-opting one rising power (India) to help restrain another rising power (China), at a time when both the U.S., and indeed Japan, are facing relative power declines in the Indo-Pacific vis-à-vis China. However, Scott calls into question the U.S. commitment – particularly in terms of financing – to an overarching and long-term Indo-Pacific Strategy, and demonstrates that President Trump's commitment to such a strategy may wax or wane depending on numerous factors. Despite confusing allies and strategic competitors alike, Scott concludes that the seemingly schizophrenic nature of current U.S. relations with the Indo-Pacific realm since 2008 – support of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) then withdrawal from TPP, for example – has been fairly successful, particularly in the emergence of robust bilateral, trilateral and quadrilateral arrangements. Additionally, Indo-Pacific concerns of key U.S. allies such as Australia and Japan have pushed the U.S. under both the Obama and Trump administrations to further position and reposition U.S. hard power in the western Pacific and eastern Indian Oceans. In this, U.S. rhetoric and actions meant to constrain a rising and assertive China have been reasonably effective.

By analyzing the competing visions of the U.S. and China, Emre Demir's article compliments Scott's work, but takes a different tack. After an instructive and critical theoretical section defining regions, conceptualizing regionalism and reviewing regionalization in Asia, Demir applies these theories and argues that the Chinese-led Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) contains inherent strengths not shared by the U.S.-led Indo-Pacific Partnership (IPP) and corresponding Indo-Pacific strategy. According to Demir, China's BRI is an inclusive project based on economic connectivity and cooperation among countries, whereas the policies and strategies put forward by IPP states are mainly defined by security-related concerns and thus fail to naturally fit into the existing politico-economic structure of Asia. Furthermore, the author argues that due to a lack of leadership, difficulties in matching diverging priorities and the fractured approach of the IPP countries, the BRI maintains distinct advantages over the IPP – at least in its current state.

Caught in the Middle or Playing Their Best Hand?

Contrary to Demir's overall positive analysis of China's actions under the umbrella foreign policies of BRI and Maritime Silk Road (MSR), Mohan Malik argues in the issue's third article that Chinese attempts to influence small states in the Indo-Pacific have been largely negative. Using the examples of the Maldives and the Seychelles, Malik shows how small states are often the first to experience major geopolitical shifts and may play a disproportionate role in triggering major

crises between larger powers. As such, small states such as the Maldives – trapped between a rising China and a rising India – are caught in a tangled web. Malik illustrates this bind by demonstrating how the political landscape has provided Beijing the opportunity to influence politicians across a string of fragile democracies and thereby gain the advantage over its competitors, foremost among them India. Not surprisingly, India is deeply concerned about China's increasingly entrenched naval presence in the Indian Ocean and the choices of action facing New Delhi are difficult. Chinese strategic writings constantly remind India of China's overall technological, economic, and military superiority. But if India acquiesces or gives in during any future clash with Beijing, the impetus for small states to continue their slide into Beijing's orbit will increase. It is within this context that Malik places New Delhi's decision to actively engage with the lynchpin states forming the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) grouping.

Jagannath P. Panda picks up on India's strategic dilemma as encapsulated in Malik's article. But where Malik worries about an increasingly inevitable Sino-centric order that will hamper not only India's rise but the future of the other FOIP states, Panda sees an opportunity for New Delhi to pursue a pluralistic foreign policy. According to Panda, this means that India's outreach to Australia, Japan and the U.S. should not be viewed as a China-containment strategy. Rather, New Delhi's new-found interest in the FOIP states is meant to balance China's strategic ambitions in the Indian Ocean. In addition, it is possibly a way of ensuring a power equilibrium in the Indo-Pacific region. But the current incarnation of the FOIP does not necessarily guarantee India's security against China. Panda demonstrates how neither Japan, the U.S. nor Australia were willing to vocally express their stance on various China-India border disputes in New Delhi's favor. As such, India's current faith in the fellow FOIP states may be limited. However, what is not in question is that India must continue to engage its powerful neighbor, China. To do so in the best possible terms, according to Panda, New Delhi's approach is to position its security interests – maritime and otherwise – front and center in its relations with Beijing while at the same time further establishing consonance and compatibility with its FOIP partner states and fellow democracies.

Like Panda, Ash Rossiter looks at the emerging posture of one of the makeweight powers in the Indo-Pacific – in this case Japan rather than India. Unlike New Delhi, Tokyo has adopted a much more consistent position vis-à-vis its strategic alliances in the region. However, what is less clear is the degree to which Japan will play an active role in the security affairs of the Indo-Pacific. Rossiter first attempts to explicate the aims and objectives of the Abe administration's central policy initiative towards the region: the FOIP strategy, which was officially unveiled in 2016 (Abe 2016). His article argues that whilst the FOIP is talked of as one of the most important organizing ideas in Japan's contemporary foreign

policy, there is actually little consensus as to what the FOIP really entails and what it may mean for the country's emerging national security posture. Rossiter uses a novel analytical framework to test for potential points of contact between the FOIP and three critical strands of Japan's national security: key alliances; the role of the Japanese Self-Defense Forces outside of territorial defense; and security cooperation with ASEAN nations. Rossiter shows why extant constitutional constraints on the use of the force combined with limited resources given over to defense make it unlikely that Japan will play a more robust role in pursuit of the FOIP's main goal: the maintenance of open seas.

Middle Powers have their Say

The next two articles examine the actions and reactions of two middling powers to the rapid transformations occurring in the Indo-Pacific. Renato Cruz De Castro compares how two Philippine presidents have taken into account the on-going geo-strategic competition between the U.S. and China and why this resulted in two very different approaches. He elucidates why President Benigno Aquino III pursued a balancing policy towards Beijing, explaining that this was not only a result of China's maritime expansion into the South China Sea but that it also took into account the Obama administration's strategic rebalancing to Asia. Bringing the analysis to the present day, De Castro provides an explanation as to President Rodrigo Duterte's decision to unravel his predecessor's geopolitical agenda in the South China Sea. Using a theoretical decision-making framework that compares prospective costs and losses, De Castro argues that Duterte pursued an appeasement policy vis-à-vis China to take advantage of Beijing's BRI initiative.

Like many states in the region, Australia has also faced the challenge of steering a course between benefitting economically from China while maintaining and forging alliances to balance its growing power. Like Rossiter's contribution on Japan, Miguel Alejandro Híjar-Chiapa, attempts to shed light on Australian thinking towards the Indo-Pacific through officially stated policy. Unlike Japan, Australia's government has produced two White Papers that explicate in great detail Canberra's defense and foreign policy approaches to the region. Híjar-Chiapa shows why the growth of China's power, and the corresponding changes to the regional status quo, are a major concern for Australia. The main take away of his article is that navigating the decade ahead might prove very hard for Australia. Only time will tell if middle powers such as Australia can extract advantages by conceptualizing the Indo-Pacific as a spatial zone and craft meaningful responses around this concept that help to address threats and seize opportunities.

Indo-Pacific Limits

The penultimate and final articles of this issue widen the geographical parameters

of the Indo-Pacific, examining how developments in the Indo-Pacific may affect states on its ostensible periphery. Jonathan Fulton makes the case that the Trump administration's approach to the Indo-Pacific, characterized by an attempt to contain China (contrast to previous U.S. administrations' efforts to integrate China into the liberal order) could potentially lead to balancing behavior across Eurasia, with competition increasing in multiple Asian regions. The Gulf, he argues in his article, is both deeply embedded in the American-led liberal order but is also increasingly engaged with China. It is, Fulton shows, a region that is thus ripe for being affected by Sino-American competition in the Indo-Pacific. This is especially true because the economic and strategic interests of external powers are coming into play at a time when the regional order in the Gulf is itself undergoing great change. He concludes that this confluence of tensions—at both the international and regional levels—will influence the Gulf's political, economic, and security environment.

Brendon J. Cannon's article concludes this special issue with a look at the western geopolitical bookend of the Indo-Pacific region: eastern Africa. An outlier in any Indo-Pacific strategy, Cannon argues that eastern African states will nonetheless play an increasingly important role in the minds of policymakers in Tokyo, Beijing and, to a lesser extent, New Delhi. His recent research in Japan informs his attempts to define specific policy alternatives for Tokyo by locating them contextually within the dynamic state of affairs in this huge and diverse region. Cannon argues that the states of eastern Africa possess complex foreign policies and a web of connections that are often ignored or misunderstood, thus making strategies pursued by powers such as China, India or Japan potentially fraught with difficulty as they may become enmeshed in regional power squabbles. He demonstrates that elites in lynchpin states such as Kenya, Ethiopia and Tanzania will pursue balancing strategies between Japan's FOIP and China's BRI, thereby avoiding having to choose sides and reaping the rewards of playing one party off against another. Cannon concludes by noting Japan should engage this region consistently on both bilateral and multilateral fronts with India, Australia, the U.S. and other partners - to include China where applicable. In doing so, Japan may see itself become a political player—with all the responsibilities and challenges that come from that - as well as an economic power in the region.

In many ways, an increasingly robust engagement in global governance informed by four very different powers but all adopting some form of FOIP strategy has only just begun. The role this nascent security architecture and normative structure may play across the vast region is yet to be revealed. Yet whatever shape the FOIP strategy - or their versions of it - may take, it will almost certainly play a significant part in shaping the region. These articles, read together, paint the beginnings of a portrait of the role a FOIP strategy may play in maintaining and

strengthening the current global governance architecture. As will become apparent in reading this issue, there is considerable interplay between the articles. The contributors, leading authorities in their chosen areas, have already written extensively on topics directly about or related to the Indo-Pacific. Although they come at the problem in very different ways, their contributions build upon one another. The end result is that the issue makes a larger contribution to the debate than the sum of each of its parts.

Bio

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Brendon J. Cannon is an Assistant Professor of International Security at the Institute of International & Civil Security, Khalifa University of Science & Technology (Abu Dhabi, UAE). His academic background includes a Ph.D. in Political Science (University of Utah, USA) with an emphasis on Comparative Politics & International Relations and an M.A. in Middle East Studies & History (University of Utah, USA). Dr. Cannon was previously a director of a university research institute in Hargeisa, Somaliland, Somalia and lectured in political science at Kisii University in Nairobi, Kenya. His research interests include the foreign policies of rising powers, the international relations and political economy of eastern Africa, the securitization of post-Ottoman identity politics, and Japan's Indo-Pacific Strategy. Dr. Cannon's articles include *Ethiopia, Berbera Port and the Shifting Balance of Power in the Horn of Africa* (co-authored with Ash Rossiter 2017); *Deconstructing Turkey's Efforts in Somalia* (2016); *Turkey in Africa: Lessons in Political Economy* (2017); and *Security, Structural Factors and Sovereignty: Analyzing Reactions to Kenya's Closure of the Dadaab Refugee Camp Complex* (co-authored with Hirotaka Fujibayashi 2018). His full-length book, *Legislating Reality and Politicizing History: Contextualizing Armenian Claims of Genocide* (Offenbach am Main: Manzara Verlag; 2016) is now available in English and German, with a second edition forthcoming in early 2019.

Ash Rossiter

Dr. Rossiter joined Khalifa University in 2015 as Assistant Professor in International Security after a multi-faceted career across the Middle East and North Africa, spanning the private, government and military sectors. Dr. Rossiter's work specializes on the changing character of war and conflict, the use of military force both historically and in the contemporary world, and technology and international security.

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