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# Fragmented or Integrated Asia: Competing Regional Visions of the US and China

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## Abstract

With its (re-)emergence as a pivotal player in world political economy, and especially since the introduction of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, China's new place in the world order has driven the US and Beijing's neighbours to find ways to deal with its rising power and influence. To counter China's growing influence, in 2011, President Obama initiated the 'Pivot to Asia' strategy. However, in 2017, the Trump administration abandoned this strategy and put forward the 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' policy that aims to bring Australia, India, Japan and the US together under the Indo-Pacific Partnership (IPP). The Chinese-led BRI and the US-led IPP represent competing visions for how political, economic and security structures of the Asia-Indo-Pacific region should evolve in the coming decades. This article, based on official policy documents and speeches of Chinese and IPP states' leaders, aims to provide insights into the competing regional visions proposed by the BRI and the IPP. It argues that due to a number of reasons, the BRI has an advantage over the IPP.

## Keywords

China, US, Belt and Road Initiative, Indo-Pacific, Asia-Pacific, Regionalism

## Introduction

Since the beginning of the 1970s, the success stories of expeditiously developing Asian economies have increasingly received the attention of the world; the 'Japanese miracle', the 'Four Asian Tigers'<sup>1</sup> and finally, the 'rise of China' captured the headlines. This enormous development and regional cooperation was achieved under the US dominated world order and the economic leadership of Japan. However, things started to change in the 1990s, especially after the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997/8. Before the crisis, Asian regional cooperation was driven mainly by non-state, especially market forces. After the crisis, to boost the slowing regional cooperation, states became more involved in the process and

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<sup>1</sup> Hong Kong, Singapore, Republic of Korea and Taiwan.

implemented policies that supported the cooperation attempts of non-state actors (Dent 2008, p. 7). Furthermore, as the Japanese economy experienced a decade-long economic crisis in the 1990s, China, with its huge potential and dynamic economy, emerged as the driving force in regional cooperation.

As it climbs the steps towards leadership in the world political economy, and especially since the introduction of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China's new place in the world order has driven the US and Beijing's neighbours in the wider Asia-Pacific region to find ways to deal with its rising power and influence. To counter China's growing influence, in 2011, US President Barack Obama initiated the 'Pivot to Asia' strategy as an attempt to change the focus of US foreign policy from the Middle East to the Asia-Pacific. However, shortly after taking office, the Trump administration abandoned this strategy and withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a multilateral trade deal unprecedented in scope and content, and started following the 'America First' vision, which, according to President Trump, aims at putting the security and interests of the US people first (The White House 2018). This move aroused anxiety among US allies in the region. However, since Trump's trip to Asia in November 2017, his administration's attitude towards Asia has started to change. Despite once again declaring he will be following the 'America First' strategy and favouring bilateral trade agreements that are 'mutually beneficial', Trump also pledged support for the idea of a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' (FOIP) region. Subsequently, the US 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS) and the summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS) clarified the 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' policy that aims to bring Australia, India, Japan and the US together under the Indo-Pacific Partnership (IPP). While first proposed by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2006/7 and adopted by the Australian and Indian governments in early 2010s, as the most powerful player among the four, the US was and remains the leading power of the grouping.

As socially constructed political projects, the Chinese-led BRI and the US-led IPP represent competing visions for how political, economic and security structures of the Asia-Indo-Pacific region should evolve in the coming decades. This article, based on official policy documents and speeches of Chinese and IPP countries' leaders, aims to provide insights into competing regional institutional arrangements as proposed by the BRI and the IPP. It argues that the Chinese-led initiative is an inclusive project based on economic connectivity and cooperation among countries, whereas the Indo-Pacific is mainly a security-related concept. Furthermore, due to a lack of leadership, difficulties in matching diverging priorities and the fractured approach of the IPP countries, the BRI has an advantage over the IPP.

The first part of this article focuses on how to define regions, how to conceptualise

regionalism as well as offering a review of regionalisation in Asia. The second part continues with the changing features of Chinese foreign policy under the leadership of Xi Jinping and how his signature project is reshaping the wider Asian region with Chinese characteristics. The third part examines the US FOIP policy and the approaches of Australia, India and Japan to the IPP. The article concludes with a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of these regional rescaling attempts and the likelihood of their successes.

### **Defining Regions and Regional Cooperation in Asia**

Defining regions and conceptualising regional cooperation and integration has been a matter of debate among scholars from various disciplines. Rather than being natural realities that are obvious geographical manifestations, regions are socially constructed through political processes. A region, which encompasses several interdependent countries, can be defined in a number of ways according to varied material, social and cognitive dimensions. These constructions all have their roots in political practices (Acharya 2012; Beeson 2018; Dent 2008, p. 6; Hettne 2005, p. 544; Katzenstein 2002, p. 105). Since these processes involve different aspects of life from economics to politics and different sectors of society from governments to social movements, an eclectic approach that combines several different disciplines and theories is needed to analyse the complexity of 'a world of regions' (Katzenstein 2002, p. 105; Söderbaum 2016, pp. 32-33).

Politics can be defined as 'competition between competing interest groups or individuals for power and leadership' (Merriam-Webster 2018, para. 3). That is to say, political processes are biased processes in which a group of people aims to favour their own interests over others'. Since regions cannot be defined without any reference to politics, they are not neutral processes but rather reflect the competing views and interests of different claimants. In other words, defining regions is a type of political struggle for creating a space that favours the gains of a group of states over the gains of other states (Wilson 2018).

Against this backdrop, this study defines regions as 'social constructs that make references to territorial location and to geographical or normative contiguity' (Börzel & Risse 2016, p. 7). Regions are spaces that cover three or more countries. In other words, they lie in between national and global levels and can be sub-continental, continental and transcontinental (Börzel & Risse 2016, pp. 6-7). Regionalism, in the widest scope, is defined as 'the structures, processes and arrangements that are working towards greater coherence within a specific international region in terms of economic, political, security, socio-cultural and other kinds of linkages' (Dent 2008, p. 7). Within this scope, regions result from two main processes that go hand-in-hand, namely from regionalism, which is 'more of a policy-driven, top-down' state-led process and regionalisation, which is 'more

of a societal-driven, bottom-up' non-state-led process. In case of an insufficient level of regionalisation, state-driven efforts of regionalism may take place in the first instance to realize regional cooperation and integration (Dent 2008, p. 7). Thus, state- and non-state-regionalisms and the actors involved in these processes do not act autonomously but act together in mixed-actor coalitions (Söderbaum & Shaw 2003, p. 222). While regionalism does not necessarily mean only formal inter-governmental regional arrangements, regionalisation is not an entirely apolitical process in which states and politics have no place (Acharya 2012, p. 12). Regionalism can exist without the existence of formal institutions (Acharya 2009; Jetschke & Katada 2016, p. 232) and states can play a role in regionalisation efforts.

Another important distinction is between regional integration and cooperation. Regional integration requires transfer of sovereignty rights and authority, either voluntarily or through pressure, of states to regional organizations as in the case of the European Union (EU), whereas in regional cooperation inter-governmental relations do not require loss of sovereignty (Börzel & Risse 2016, p. 8; Acharya 2012, p. 12). This difference reflects the divergence of the regionalism debate in the literature. While old regionalism was based on regional integration through state-led initiatives that focused on and influenced by the European experience, with the end of the Cold War new regionalism approaches that take into account the multiplicity of regional integration and cooperation and the importance of non-state actors came to the surface. Currently, the field is strongly influenced by comparative regionalism studies that both build upon previous studies but also aim to transcend them by moving beyond their EU-centrism through considering the distinctiveness of different regions and their cooperation types and designs. To achieve this, comparative regionalism studies are both eclectic and inclusive in their approaches to regionalism (Acharya 2016, p. 110; Söderbaum 2016, pp. 30-33).

In this sense, the initiation of the concept of Indo-Pacific and the BRI are examples more of state-driven regional cooperation efforts without the existence of a formal regional organization. Furthermore, like all regional projects, as discussed by Wilson (2018), they are an example of 'rescaling' the scale of governance practices, which 'refers to the process where social, economic and political systems are reconstructed to operate at different spatial scales'. Rescaling is composed of two types of transitions: *institutional rescaling* and *functional rescaling*. The former is about defining the scale of a region. In other words, institutional rescaling is important in determining who is included or excluded from the scope of a region and thus, in designating the distribution of power and the relations among the members (Wilson 2018). Since regions are social constructs and contingent upon processes of affiliation, identification and recognition, the degree of institutional-

sation is important for a newly proposed conception of a region to be successful (Beeson 2018). Functional rescaling, on the other hand, is about the motivations and justifications of a regional project. As the scale of a region changes, to accommodate with the new scale, forms and purpose of underlying governance practices also change (Wilson 2018). The success of an institutionalisation process, either through the creation of social realities or of organizations, plays an important part in defining a region.

In the Asian context, regionalism through institution-building has been a rather challenging process when compared with other parts of the world, especially Europe. The ultimate aim of regionalism in Asia was not integration as in the case of Europe, but autonomy and cooperation. In other words, regional organizations in the region are examples of regional cooperation rather than integration. One of the reasons for this is the sensitivity of Asian nations, due to the history of colonialism, when it comes to renouncing their sovereignties to other institutional settings such as regional or international organizations. Because of that, Asian-based regional institutions function either as discussion forums with non-legally binding obligations as in the case of Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation or on the basis of unanimous verdict as in the case of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). One other related feature of Asian regional organizations is the existence of weak and/or ineffective secretariats, which automatically affects the capacity of these institutions to function effectively (Acharya 2016, p. 110; Beeson 2018; Jetschke & Katada 2016, p. 238; Risse 2016, p. 96). In such a case, the power distribution in the international and regional system has an important role to play for regional arrangements. An effective regional leadership, especially, can have a significant impact on building effective regional institutions. However, both due to animosities and mistrust created by historical legacies such as the Japanese invasion, the US bilateral hub-and-spoke system and the Sino-Indian War as well as due to the high number of powerful countries, the region lacks an effective leadership. In the post-Second World War period, the US played the role of an off-shore balancer to 'stabilize' the region. But especially since the Global Financial Crisis of 2008/9, its previously dominant position has been eroding due to relative decline of its power and China's rising status in the region (Beeson 2016, 2017a, p. 236, 2017b). Today, the Asia-Indo-Pacific region has five strong countries, China, India, Japan, Russia and the US, that have the capacity and desire to lead regional cooperation efforts. While this situation complicates such efforts in the region, it also gives weaker states and institutions like ASEAN the chance to play an important role in mediating these powers (Zhao 2011, pp. 167-168). These characteristics of regional cooperation in Asia contribute to the fragmented regionalism and under-institutionalization in the region and the complexity of the competition among different visions and ideas of region building efforts of leading powers, including

the BRI and IPP.

For all these reasons, the IPP states' intention of shifting the focus of attention from the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific is not just a neutral geographical expansion of existing regional institutions in the region by including Indian Ocean countries in the picture. Rather it is a way of improving both their own particular positions and the interests of 'likeminded countries' against a rejuvenating China, which has been in the last decade slowly but steadily re-forming the regional landscape especially through the BRI. In other words, redefining the region as the Indo-Pacific and forming a partnership based on this definition should be seen as the IPP states' response to China's ambitious BRI initiatives.

### **Integrating Asia with Chinese Characteristics: Belt and Road Initiative**

President Xi is an ambitious leader aiming to rejuvenate his country as head of state until the middle of 21st century. China under Xi will remain under the firm leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC) with a two-stage development plan. These are called the Two Centenary Goals (两个一百年目标). According to these goals, by 2021, the centenary of the founding of the CPC, China will complete the building of a moderately prosperous society. After this first achievement, the country will continue its efforts of modernizing itself until the goal of transforming China into 'a great modern socialist country' is achieved by 2049, the centenary of the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) (Xi 2018, p.32-34). To accomplish the Chinese Dream (中国梦), Xi has adjusted some parts of post-Mao era Chinese foreign policy and followed a combination of proactive, assertive and offensive but simultaneously at times defensive, restrained and cautious foreign policy strategies. These are a reflection of China's multiple identities, to include those of a developing country, a developed country, a major power and a rising power (Ferdinand 2016, p. 949; Hong 2016, p. 4; Tekdal 2018, p. 374; Wang 2016, p. 461).

### ***Chinese Foreign Policy under Xi Jinping***

As was clear from the messages delivered by Xi during the 19th National Congress of the CPC,<sup>2</sup> China under Xi has emerged as one of the major regional powers in Asia and aspires to become a global power. During his three-and-a-half hours long speech at the congress, he declared his desire of transforming China, till the mid-century, into 'a great modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, harmonious, and beautiful' (Xi 2017, p. 10). Xi calls this goal realising the 'Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation' (中华民族伟大复兴中国梦) (2017, p. 1), which means, to use IR terminology, achieving superpower status. To reach this goal, Xi began changing the course of Chinese

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<sup>2</sup> Brown (2017) defined this congress as the CPC's first global congress.

foreign policy in 2013. While some of the features of China's foreign policy show continuity with the era of former President Hu Jintao, Xi managed to make substantial changes from placing more emphasis on neighbourhood diplomacy to closely linking domestic objectives to foreign policy goals.

The decade-long leadership of Hu has often been regarded as 'the lost decade' by many Chinese and foreign observers because of increased inequality in Chinese society, high levels of corruption, environmental pollution and an uncoordinated and fragmented foreign policy approach (Li & Cary 2011). Hu, as his predecessor Jiang Zemin, followed the foreign policy strategy of keeping a low profile (韬光养晦) that was formulated by Deng Xiaoping in the aftermath of the Tiananmen incidents of 1989. Even though he raised his voice in demanding a more democratic and multilateral world order by proposing the concept of 'Harmonious World' (Hu 2005), and engaged with international institutions and norms as well as joining other states in the establishment of new international initiatives such as the BRICS<sup>3</sup>, Hu's focus was mainly on economic growth at all costs. In line with this domestic orientation, under his presidency China continued the policy of remaining non-committal to requests for action and providing leadership (Ferdinand 2016, p. 942). One other reason for this passivity in its relations with the outside world was the lack of a concrete and holistic foreign policy (Breslin 2013, p. 633), which was inadmissible for the new leadership.

Almost as soon as he took office, Xi set about changing this fragmented and non-committal foreign policy of Hu by initiating a two-tiered approach. First was to reform decision-making structures by creating new institutions such as the National Security Commission of the CPC to coordinate domestic and foreign policymaking and by centralizing power in decision-making by positioning Xi at the centre of CPC Central Leading Groups related to domestic and foreign affairs (Beeson 2017b; Wang 2017; Zhang 2016, pp. 452-456). Second, in order to convey and coordinate the main foreign policy principles and directions, Xi gathered all important actors who contribute to China's foreign policymaking and implementation processes at the Conference on the Diplomatic Work on Neighbouring Countries in October 2013, and then at the Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs in November 2014.

These two conferences were useful in providing a general view of the regional and international system and in setting an integrated strategy to regional and global issues. In this context, the CPC determined a foreign policy strategy that focuses on four related areas of neighbourhood diplomacy, major-country relations, developing country relations and multilateral diplomacy (FMPCR 2014, para.11). Some features of this four-layered strategy are a continuation of previous era for-

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<sup>3</sup> Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa.

eign policy strategies whereas some others are new. These new features represent a departure of Chinese foreign policy from the strategy of keeping a low profile to what Yan Xuetong names the strategy of 'striving for achievement' (奋发有为) that is more efficient in creating favourable conditions for national rejuvenation. The importance of this change comes from the different approaches of these two strategies feature. While the former is oriented towards the economy, aims to stay non-committal to leadership demands in international issues and favours economic gains in relations with other countries, the latter is politically-oriented, open to undertaking responsibility by focusing on strategic relations rather than economic gains, especially in relations with neighbouring countries and favours political morality over profits (Yan 2014). Thus, all the above mentioned four areas of Chinese foreign policy essentially aim to link China's domestic objectives of realizing the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation and international objectives of establishing a stable and peaceful regional and international order that is favourable to the stability and development of China (Xi 2014, pp. 328-329, 2018 p. 22). In other words, the goal of the Xi era Chinese foreign policy is to deepen both economic and trade ties and security relations, especially with neighbouring countries and regions by linking them to China's development trajectory. Xi's signature project, the BRI, was designed to just achieve this goal by turning the Chinese Dream into the world's, or at least Asia's, 'dream' (Ferdinand 2016, p. 957).

### **Belt and Road Initiative: A New Way of Organizing Asia?**

The BRI, which was first proposed by Xi during his state visits to Kazakhstan in September 2013 and then to Indonesia in October 2013, aims to build two sets of grand initiatives, the Silk Road Economic Belt (hereinafter Belt) and the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road (hereinafter Road), to connect the two edges of Eurasia from East Asia to Europe by linking the Asian, European and African continents with a network of land, sea and air passages (NDRC 2015). While the principal aim of the initiative is to achieve regional economic development by furthering trade and investment via increased connectivity, official documents and declarations of Chinese officials also point to the need and desire to maintain closer links among the peoples of a variety of countries with diverse cultures by creating the environment to learn and understand different civilizations, and this way to promote friendship and peace in the wider region (NDRC 2015; Xi 2017). Thus, although it is a Chinese state-led initiative, the BRI aims to integrate Asia through the twin processes of regionalism and regionalisation, or state-led and non-state-led regionalisms that include mixed-actor coalitions of governments, market actors and other non-governmental players.

The BRI is an ambitious project that intends to cover and connect all of Asia through six land corridors: the Eurasian Land Bridge, China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor, China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor, China-

Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor, and two maritime transport routes linking major sea ports through the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean route and the South China Sea and the South Pacific route (NDRC 2015). Even though these projects are not new and many others included predate the BRI, the importance of this initiative is its desire and ability to coordinate and combine all these projects under a holistic approach (Summers 2016, pp. 1632-1634).

The BRI is a political-economic project and thus is driven by economic, political and security motivations. China is eager to highlight the economic motivations of exporting excess labour and capacity in industries such as steel and cement, relocating some overcapacity in production, furthering the strategy of 'going out', ensuring the development of inland south and western regions like Yunnan and Xinjiang, lowering the excessive exchange reserves and internationalization of the renminbi, or RMB (Chung 2018, p. 316; Hong 2016, pp. 3-6; Ren 2016, pp. 440-441; Summers 2016, pp. 1636-1637; Tekdal 2018, pp. 378-384; Wang 2016, p. 457; Zhang 2017, p.320). However, several security concerns are also important for understanding the BRI. China is dependent on imported energy, and uninterrupted energy flows are vital for the Chinese economy to function smoothly. This means energy security is a top priority for the CPC. Some 80 percent of China's Middle Eastern energy imports flow through the Strait of Malacca, where the security is mainly provided by the US and Indian navies. China is wary of a possible blockade by these two powers in case of disagreements. Therefore, it follows a two-tiered strategy of constructing pipelines to bypass the Malacca Strait and diversify its energy supply by building-up ports and refuelling stations in the Indian Ocean (Chung 2018, p. 316; Tekdal 2018, pp. 380-381). This second policy, labelled as the 'String of Pearls' strategy by many Indian commentators, causes anxiety in India and the US (Chung 2018, p. 317) and can be regarded as one of the reasons for the IPP.

The above-mentioned underdevelopment of China's western regions, especially Xinjiang, is another major security concern for China. Through linking this region via pipelines, highways and economic zones to Central Asia, Beijing aims to modernize and develop the economy of Xinjiang and thus, decrease the tendency for ethnic separatism, religious extremism and terrorism (Miller 2017, Wang 2014, p.131). Finally, the BRI can be seen, to some extent, as a response to the US Pivot to Asia, which was regarded as a US strategy for containing China's rise (Wang 2016, p.461).

A critical part of this ambitious and wide scope initiative with such economic, political and security aims is financial backing. As its initiator, China is the main financier of the BRI with declared contribution of over US\$1 trillion. To fund in-

infrastructure investments and other projects that are under the BRI banner, China established both new unilateral and multilateral funds and institutions like the Silk Road Fund and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and channelled funds from existing institutions such as China's policy and state-owned banks. China also intends to integrate other multilateral funding institutions such as the BRICS New Development Bank (NDB) and possible future institutions like the SCO Bank to the BRI (NDRC 2015).

An important feature of the BRI is its all-inclusive approach to membership. In other words, it is open to all countries and international and regional organizations that have the intention to become a part of this mega project (NDRC 2015; Xi 2017). Therefore, it is fair to say that the Chinese attitude to Asian cooperation, at least in this case, is an example of inclusive regionalism. However, despite its inclusiveness, the BRI aims to favour Chinese interests by positioning it at the centre or the starting point of Asian connectivity and cooperation in which all roads lead to Beijing. Furthermore, as all efforts of (re)defining a region, this initiative is also a political and socially constructive process that combines institutional and functional rescaling processes by proposing new ideas, institutions and policies to reshape the region. Due to its wide scope and focus on both hard and soft infrastructure of connecting ideas and institutions, Callahan (2016) defines Xi's grand strategy as an attempt for building a Sino-centric regional order and even promoting the Chinese style of global governance.

However, despite the great magnitude and ambition of the BRI, at the discourse level, till today neither Xi nor other Chinese officials proposed a new term to redefine the mainstream concept, Asia-Pacific. Furthermore, China has no intention of embracing the Indo-Pacific definition and continues to prefer the established Asia-Pacific instead. The reason for this may be the BRI's economy-centric approach. The terms 'Pacific community' and 'Asia-Pacific' were coined by Japan and the US in the 1970s and 1980s and supported keenly by Australia till the early 2010s (Dirlik 1993, p. 7) mainly due to concerns of managing the increased economic connectivity of the developing and developed Asia-Pacific countries through deepening trade and investment ties (Wilson 2018). Notwithstanding its security logic, since the BRI is essentially an 'international economic cooperation project' (Wang 2016, p. 461) China's choice of continuing to use the term Asia-Pacific seems logical despite the BRI's ambitious goal of integrating all of Asia, both through territorial and maritime domains.

Despite all the positive sides of China's proposal, there are some problems as well. First and foremost, China cannot overcome the perception that it poses a threat to some countries, especially in the Asia-Pacific region. While some of its neighbours worry about sovereignty issues and border disputes, others are afraid of being swallowed by China's massive economic capabilities. Finally, some of the

projects that are included in the BRI are in financially or even at times strategically risky areas that may end up as bad loans. To accomplish its objectives China needs to find solutions to these (possible) problems.

### **Indo-Pacific Partnership: Hub-and-Spokes System 2.0?**

The idea of FOIP, on the other hand, is first and foremost an attempt to redefine the region through a political process. The proponents of this new conceptualisation deliberately aim to replace the Asia-Pacific with the Indo-Pacific through a political process that favours the interests of IPP states versus those of others', especially those of China, which is the main target of the IPP (Pan 2014, p. 454). Thus, as all politically oriented social constructions, this is not a neutral rescaling process where only the definition of the region is changed by enlarging the geographical scale. In other words, the Indo-Pacific idea encapsulates both institutional and functional rescaling processes.

Some commentators and official documents of IPP governments base the need to redefine the region as the Indo-Pacific on economic grounds like the rising importance of the Indian Ocean sea lanes in the world trade and strengthening ties among the Pacific and Indian Ocean economies (Medcalf 2014, p. 472; Commonwealth of Australia 2013, p. 8). However, as Wilson (2018) shows, economic motivations are not strong enough to support this rescaling. Thus, the Indo-Pacific neither is a 'natural' economic region nor has the necessary economic institutional architecture. On the contrary, due to lack of a strong economic basis, this attempt carries the risk of undermining the sound economic connectivity of the Asia-Pacific by diminishing the existing spatial fit between regionalisation and regionalism. Thus, rather than economic motivations, the primary reason for IPP is security, especially the need for preserving maritime security against a strengthening China (Beeson 2018, Wilson 2018).

### **US Foreign Policy under Donald Trump**

Due to the rising importance of South and East Asia in political-economic and security issues, in 2011, Obama initiated the 'Pivot to Asia' policy, which was composed of four main features; geographical scope, security, diplomacy and economics. With the Pivot, in line with the rising importance of the Indian Ocean in the world political economy, the US expanded its focus from Northeast to Southeast and South Asia by strengthening security relations with its regional allies and partners and by improving bilateral and multilateral ties with regional actors. (Indyk, Lieberthall & O'Hanlon 2012). In short, the US interest in the Indo-Pacific started long before the initiation of the FOIP strategy in late 2017.

With the new Trump administration, the US policy changed significantly from being the leader of multilateralism to a more inward looking nationalistic strategy.

This shift inherently included a changing policy towards China. While Obama pursued an engagement policy towards China, Trump changed this liberal pragmatic attitude and started following a 'principled' realist approach that is based on power calculations among states (NDS 2018; NSS 2017, p. 1). His foreign policy vision can be clearly seen both from the 2017 NSS and 2018 NDS documents as well as from his threats and actions for a trade war with China and even with US allies. These strategy documents specify inter-state strategic competition as the primary concern for the US and define China as a 'strategic competitor' and a 'revisionist power' that is 'actively competing' against the US and its allies. Furthermore, 'China seeks to displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region, expand the reaches of its state-driven economic model, and reorder the region in its favor' (NDS 2018, pp. 1-2; NSS 2017, pp. 25-27). Therefore, to win the long-term strategic competition with China, maintaining the power balance in a FOIP is the principal priority of the US. To reach that goal, Washington defined its regional priority policy as creating a networked security structure that brings together both multilateral and bilateral security alliances and partnerships (NDS 2018, pp. 4, 9).

Even though the 2017 NSS claims that the US vision for Indo-Pacific excludes no country, it also argues that a geopolitical rivalry is ongoing among repressive and free world order visions. Besides, Washington claims that Beijing is using all necessary means from economic 'inducements' to military threats to achieve its political and security agenda and, if successful, this may result in the diminishing sovereignty of regional states, which ask for an enduring US leadership for a collective action against China's dominance. To resist the threat emanating from China, and others like North Korea, and to keep the Indo-Pacific free and open, the US welcomes both the increased role of its long-term allies like Japan and Australia and an emerging power like India as a strategic and defence partner. Moreover, it also welcomes the intensified multilateral cooperation with the three countries under the quadrilateral partnership (NSS 2017, pp. 45-47).

In line with this, the US has been following a policy to strengthen its strategic and security partnership with India. In August 2016, two countries signed the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement that allows military forces of each country to use the facilities of the other. In 2017, India and US participated the Malabar naval exercises together with Japan. Moreover, ever since the US recognized it as a major defence partner in 2005, India has become an important military hardware market for US defence industry. Apart from security, the two countries are also deepening their energy cooperation and strengthening economic ties. Finally, the US supports the Indian refusal to join the BRI due to sovereignty issues regarding the Kashmir region (Borah 2018, pp. 86-87).

Despite the deepening ties among the US and India and their shared interest to

limit China's rise, is India, and are also Australia and Japan, willing to fully accept and ready to bear the costs of an exclusive Indo-Pacific vision of the US?

### **The Attitudes of Australia, India and Japan**

Among the three other partners of the IPP, Japan is the country that most closely embraces the Indo-Pacific idea the way the US defines it. Indeed, the Trump administration borrowed the term 'FOIP' from the Japanese government. Prime Minister Abe was the first official to propose the idea of connecting the Pacific and Indian Oceans in his 2007 speech at the Indian Parliament where he mentioned the formation of 'a region called "the Arc of Freedom and Prosperity"... along the outer rim of the Eurasian continent' (Abe 2007). In his bid for a 'democratic security diamond' in Asia, Abe thinks that India, with the US and Australia, should play a greater role against an assertive China 'in preserving the common good' in the Indo-Pacific region (Abe 2012). Japan's India move is helpful in getting important support from a 'like-minded' country but also in diverting some of China's attention and resources to India and the Indian Ocean (Chanlett-Avery 2018).

In a joint statement issued by Japan and India in 2016, Abe together with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi mentioned the importance of 'improving connectivity between Asia and Africa through realizing a free and open Indo-Pacific' (Ministry of External Affairs 2016). This was a precursor declaration of Japan's 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy' that aims to 'improve "connectivity" between Asia and Africa through free and open Indo-Pacific, and promote stability and prosperity of the region as a whole' (MoFAJ 2017, p. 9). Compared to the US's, the Japanese Indo-Pacific strategy is more comprehensive and wider in scope. While the former basically focuses on the security dimension, the latter also underlines the development and infrastructure investment by improving connectivity. In this manner, Japan aims to become an important player in 'quality' infrastructure building, which is something the peoples of the wider Indo-Pacific region may be more interested in than politically and militarily challenging China, a prominent (potential) source of investment and financial aid for developing countries (Green 2018, p. 29; MoFAJ 2017, p. 2; Thankachan 2017).

From the fact that India and Japan share a similar geopolitical logic in redefining the region and safeguarding the freedom of navigation in international waters, it should not be concluded that the motivations they share and the policies they follow towards China are completely compatible with each other. Above all, India regards the Indian Ocean as part of its sphere of influence. This is why India is so worried about China's 'intrusion' into its backyard (Hemmings & Hull 2018). However, it should also be noted that India is also wary of its IPP partners' increasing influence in the region and this may hinder future efforts to further the

IPP's security partnership in the Indian Ocean (Xue and Liu 2018). Second, Indian officials are less eager to challenge Beijing directly than their Japanese and US partners. Unlike the administrations of Trump and Abe, India's official policy towards the Indo-Pacific has been moderate and focused more on ASEAN's role in regional economic and security structures for forming 'an open, balanced, inclusive and transparent regional architecture' (Chacko 2014, p. 447). Moreover, since the early 1990s, to develop its economy, India has been following policies to deepen its economic ties with East Asia. As the most dynamic country in the region, China has an important role in this process. Therefore, the likelihood of India playing a balancing role as the 'lynchpin' of the Indo-Pacific, for the time being, is not a viable one (Chacko 2014 pp. 441-443; He 2018; Pan 2014, p. 461).

Australia was the second country, after Japan, to embrace the Indo-Pacific term into its official use. Indeed, the Indo-Pacific reflects Australia's identity and favours geographical place much better than the Asia-Pacific because the country positions in the middle of Indian and Pacific Oceans. However, Australia's stance is different than that of both the US and Japan and in some sense also that of India. On the one hand, it is quite clear from its 2016 Defence White Paper and 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper that Canberra's main objective is to convince the US to support the Indo-Pacific idea and to continue being Australia's main ally and security guarantor and leading the like-minded democracies of the IPP against a rising and assertive China. In return, Australia is ready to share the costs of the US engagement with the region by increasing its defence spending to 2% of its GDP by 2020 and supporting the US leadership in the world as it has been doing since the Second World War. On the other hand, notwithstanding the underlying fear of a rising China, due to its strong trade and investment links with Beijing, Canberra does not want to antagonize its largest trade partner by directly challenging its position in the region (Commonwealth of Australia 2016; Commonwealth of Australia 2017). Furthermore, as Medcalf (2014, p. 472) states, China is an indispensable part and the main reason for redefining the region as Indo-Pacific, and rather than India, China is the quintessential power in the region. Due to this 'China-dilemma' it faces, Australia is against an exclusionary Indo-Pacific vision that specifically leaves China out. In short, Canberra plays a delicate balancing game in which it tries to hedge against a rising China by including India and Japan to its partnership with the US while at the same time tries to avoid antagonizing China (Pan 2014, p. 459).

In short, the IPP lacks many of the strengths of the BRI. First, there is no single country leading the process and designing the general features of it. Second, there is no consensus on the scope of the region among the partner states. While Australia and the US prefer a narrow definition that includes the area from the eastern Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean, Japan and India include some parts

of Africa and the Middle East as well. Third, the Indo-Pacific idea is a discursive construct without the necessary economic basis. Finally, there is an important division among the members as to what kind of a regional cooperation project the Indo-Pacific is to become. The US and Japan prefer an exclusive region in which they can leave China out and, even more importantly, challenge or contain its rise. India is concerned with the Chinese intrusion into its sphere of influence but at the same time does not want to challenge China directly. Australia, on the other hand, is in favour of an inclusive regionalism in which China can take its place as one of the leading actors in the region. Still, as a group, what they all have in common is their fragmented approach to Asia. Even the most inclusive and broad in scope approach to the Indo-Pacific covers only the maritime territories of Asia and excludes territorial areas, which include energy-rich Central Asia. This exclusionary characteristic of the IPP reflects the Cold War era US hub-and-spoke system of bilateral alliances which has arguably been harmful for Asian regional cooperation and integration by fostering the creation of a fractured region.

## **Conclusion**

The decade since the Global Financial Crisis has seen increased competition between the US and a steadily rising China. As it climbs the steps towards leadership in world political economy, China's new place in the world order has driven the US and its partners in the wider Asia-Pacific region to find ways to deal with Beijing's rising power and influence. To counter China's growing influence, the US initiated the 'Pivot to Asia' strategy. China responded to this by proposing the BRI. After taking office, President Trump abandoned the Pivot policy but, to counter China's BRI, initiated the FOIP strategy which, at least for the moment, remains unclear and contested. As such, the Indo-Asia-Pacific region is now faced with two distinct regional visions.

The main driver of the BRI is achieving regional economic cooperation and development and through this overcoming the current and possible future problems of the Chinese economy. However, security related goals are also an important incentive for Beijing to initiate and finance this huge project. In contrast, the motivation behind the IPP is the need to curb growing Chinese influence and safeguard the freedom of navigation in the Indian and Pacific oceans. In other words, its priority is to keep things as they are in the region. Furthermore, while the BRI involves a combination of political economic and societal cooperation of both states and non-state actors, the IPP is basically a politics and security driven approaches among states. Despite China's and Asian states' attitude towards informal and soft approach with regards to regional cooperation, under the BRI, as in the case of the AIIB, institutionalisation has been started. The IPP states, on the other hand, till today, have not taken any steps for such institutionalisation other than irregular meetings among government officials of respective states and

military exercises. Finally, the BRI offers an inclusive vision for Asian cooperation. It is open to all countries and multilateral institutions that want to take part in this ambitious project. Notwithstanding that there is an important division among the members as to what kind of a regional cooperation project the Indo-Pacific may be, the IPP states currently limit the membership of the grouping by excluding both China and huge territories of Asia other than the Indo-Pacific region. In other words, there is an important difference among the two regional visions on the issue of institutional recalling where the BRI offers an integrative regional vision to Asia whereas the IPP, instead of accommodating China's rise, proposes the continuation of a fragmented Asian region.

Judging from the responsiveness of the Eurasian countries to the BRI, it seems that inclusive proposals for mutual economic gains and development are more attractive than exclusive security groupings. Even states that have territorial disputes with China like the Philippines and Vietnam, and the most prominent US allies like the United Kingdom (UK) and Australia are charmed by the opportunities China offers. On the other hand, it is hard to tell whether the idea of the Indo-Pacific has attracted even Asian countries that are wary of China's regional intentions. At present, no other country outside the four IPP states has used the Indo-Pacific term in official statements and showed willingness to be a part of the grouping. For all these reasons, it seems the BRI is presently in a better position to shape the future of the Asian region.

## **Bio**

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