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# Navigating Dangerous Waters: Australia and the Indo Pacific

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## Abstract

For the last four decades, Asia-Pacific has been the dominant concept defining the wider Pacific region. However, in the last decade a new construct has emerged illustrating the new balance of power – the Indo-Pacific. This new idea has been championed by Australia with the aim of responding to changes to the regional status quo resulting from the growth of China's power. The possible consequences of this shifting security landscape are a major concern for Australia, as the new Defence and Foreign Policy White Papers demonstrate. Thus, Australia is now seeking a secure and stable neighbourhood in which adherence to a rules-based order delivers lasting peace between all states, and where prosperity reigns. Nevertheless, navigating the decade ahead might prove very hard given the uncertainties of an increasingly challenging world. This article aims to explore the potential ramifications of the idea of the Indo-Pacific and how Australia can take advantage of this new construct in order to provide meaningful responses to address threats to the region and to its own interests.

## Keywords

Australia, Indo-Pacific, Asia-Pacific, Foreign Policy, Defense

## Introduction

Since the turn of the century, the political landscape of the world has undergone a considerable transformation. Among these fundamental changes, the rise of China has emerged as one of the most challenging issues for the status quo given the implications of the country's new role as a power with global reach, which – naturally – has been mostly felt in its immediate neighbourhood. As a consequence, the region known as Asia-Pacific is being reshaped by the shifting balance of power, and this restructuring is not only material but also ideational. This means that the idea of the region is being altered, even to the point of being called by the relatively novel name of Indo-Pacific. Given that the potential con-

sequences of the fluctuating security environment are a matter of grave concern for Australia, this country has been one of the most relevant actors involved in the process of constructing a new idea of the region and, as such, it has developed new and comprehensive defence and foreign policies to support it. Nevertheless, it will undoubtedly prove very difficult to navigate this uncertain future.

Therefore, this paper aims to explore the nature of the seeming ontological change taking place in the Pacific Rim and its ramifications; Australia's place, role, and interests in this imagined community; and how can Australia take advantage of this new construct in order to provide meaningful responses to the serious threats and buoyant opportunities that these transformations may bring.

### **(Re-)Constructing the Region: from “Asia-Pacific” to the “Indo-Pacific”**

The demise of the bipolar system after the end of the Cold War altered the world and the ways we see it. Thus, as Katzenstein (2002, p. 104) argues, “power politics is now occurring in complex regional contexts that undercut the stark assumption of the international system as unmitigated anarchy.” We therefore live now in a world of regions, shaped by a varied assortment of economic and social processes. But, “regions are, among other things, social constructions created through politics” (Katzenstein 2002, p. 105), that is, regions are not determined solely by geographical or material issues, but mostly by ideas.

Consequently, the understanding of how ideational forces work is vital to “trace the ways in which interests and identities change over time and new forms of cooperation and community can emerge” (Hettne & Söderbaum 2002, p. 36). According to this constructivist approach, since there are no given regions and no given regional interests either, identities and interests must be “shaped in the process of interaction and intersubjective understanding” (Hettne & Söderbaum 2002, p. 36). The question here is how the idea of the Pacific has been built.

According to Arturo Santa-Cruz (2005, p. 3), the ideas of the “Pacific Rim” and “Asia-Pacific” have floated around for a long time, turning the so-called “Century of the Pacific” into a sort of zeitgeist. But their plasticity and lack of clarity about which countries should be included in these classifications have led to geographers' reticence to use them as standard concepts to identify the region. Nonetheless, in the fields of journalism and social sciences, as well as in political discourse, they have gained wide currency. But, as he notes, the assumption that a discourse is capable enough to create a region is questionable, such as the utility of these concepts as regional constructs. This matter becomes even more evident with the fact that regional identity depends on the basis of shared norms and values (Acharya 2002, p. 27) and, given the presence of multiple actors with very diverse identities that champion both Western and Asian values, it might seem

that the idea of the region is shallow and useless and that, therefore, as Manuel Castells (cited in Santa-Cruz, 2005, p. 16) has noted, “there does not exist a region in the Pacific as a distinct or integrated entity and, consequently there will not be a Pacific century”.

Nevertheless, the idea of the Pacific as a community has prospered, and there are good reasons for it – identities and interests are built in an intersubjective process, yet no interaction is possible without some shared interests to start with, and countries in both sides of the Ocean have found that much-needed starting point in economic integration. For that reason, since the late 1970s, the arguably imprecise definition of Asia-Pacific has been the dominant concept that delineates the wider Pacific region in terms of commerce and international politics, giving way to an Asian-Pacific identity that is not based on a strong sense of collectiveness and is open to multiple interpretations. This, of course, has been extensively motivated by countries such as Japan and Australia in order not just to promote the idea of a community of interests especially based on economic integration, but also to justify indispensable continued U.S. involvement in the region, controversial as it may be. However, the last decade has seen the emergence of a new construct that is aiming not just to illustrate the increasingly changing balance of power in the Pacific Rim, but also to reshape the ways in which actors behave and interact: the Indo-Pacific.

Although the origins of the term are still uncertain, it has been argued that Australian scholars and politicians were the first to use it. In the 1950s the concept was used to discuss the decolonisation of dominions surrounding Australia and was used again in the following decade at two seminars held by the Australian Institute of International Affairs (AIIA) and the Australian National University (ANU) discussing nuclear proliferation and Commonwealth responsibilities within the region and in the 1970s as part of the Australian security discourse (Bhatia & Sakhuja 2014, p. 42). Yet for around 30 years the term was not prominent until its re-emergence in 2005 in Michael Richardson’s paper *Australia-Southeast Asia relations and the East Asian Summit*.

Nevertheless, a more concise definition of the Indo-Pacific was formally introduced for the first time in 2007 by Capt. Dr. Gurpreet S. Khurana, an Indian Navy maritime strategist, in his paper *Security of Sea Lines: Prospects for India-Japan Cooperation*, as “the maritime space comprising the Indian Ocean and the western Pacific. Littoral to it are the states of Asia (including West Asia/Middle East) and eastern Africa” (Khurana 2007, p. 150). Moreover, that same year, the concept was endorsed and used for the first time in political discourse by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in his speech to the Indian Parliament, in which he highlighted how a “new ‘broader Asia’ takes shape at the confluence of the two seas of the Indian and Pacific Oceans” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2007,

para. 52), “an immense network spanning the entirety of the Pacific Ocean, incorporating the United States of America and Australia”, allowing “people, goods, capital, and knowledge to flow freely” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2007, para. 30).

Furthermore, India, Japan, Australia, and the United States held their first joint naval exercises in the Indian Ocean and initiated the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, an informal strategic forum ostensibly taking the concept to a next level, although the nascent initiative did not prosper as the then recently elected Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd decided to withdraw from it to avoid the wrath of China. However, the idea “has gained increasing prevalence in the geopolitical and strategic discourse since then and is now being used increasingly by policy-makers, analysts and academics in Asia and beyond” (Khurana 2017a, p. 1).

Both Khurana and Abe originally conceived the idea of the Indo-Pacific as a geopolitical amalgamation capable of bringing about freedom and prosperity as well as coexistence between different peoples with the ultimate goal of achieving global and regional stability. Nonetheless, Khurana has argued, the meaning has drifted away from its original proposition and has evolved into “a new configuration in which India and America, along with the other major democratic nations in Asia – Japan and Australia especially – join to contain China’s growing influence in an updated version of the Cold War” (Khurana 2017b, p. 1), “thereby dividing the region into opposing camps” (Khurana 2017c, p. 1). This assessment, however, has been rebuked by Abhijit Singh, senior fellow and head of maritime policy at the Observer Research Foundation in New Delhi; he states that “Indo-Pacific has always been about balancing the rise of China” and avoiding Chinese expansionism in the form of a permanent presence in both the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, implying thus that using “the term to describe an emerging India-Japan-US-Australia alliance as a balance against Beijing is not a distortion of the term’s original meaning; it is the fulfilment of it” (Singh 2017, p. 1). Khurana’s retort to Singh is that even when the Indo-Pacific has always been about China there is a nuanced difference between both views (Khurana 2017c, p. 2).

This of course is not seen favourably by China, and that is why Chinese Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, dismissed all the versions of the concept as ‘headline-grabbing ideas’ that are ‘like the sea foam in the Pacific or Indian Ocean: they may get some attention, but soon will dissipate’ (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2018, para. 60). This need to criticise the mere use of the words Indo-Pacific, when there are many other tangible things to worry about, might be a signal of China’s preoccupation about something more substantial that might come as a consequence of the use of this new construct by policymakers, journalists, and scholars alike. As Rory Medcalf (2018) states, the emerging Indo-Pacific debate is in large part about China:

*In short, the Indo-Pacific is emerging as the chief conceptual challenge to the idea of One Belt and One Road – a China-centric vision of the extended region. It is also reducing the salience of the late 20th century idea of the Asia-Pacific, essentially an East Asia-centric order that had come to suit China because it tended to exclude China's emerging rival, India. (Medcalf 2018, p. 2)*

Whatever the interpretation of the term could be, the truth is that the core idea of the region has been championed in the last ten years by the leaders of several countries not just in terms of political discourse, but also of policy, putting flesh on its bones. In the case of Australia, the most poignant examples of this are the Defence White Papers of 2013 and 2016, and the Foreign Policy White Paper of 2017, in which the Government of the Commonwealth's outlook on the idea of the Indo-Pacific has been well established.

The first official mention of the concept appeared in the 2013 Defence White Paper. It stated that Australia was going through an “economic strategic and military shift to the Indo-Pacific” (Commonwealth of Australia 2013, p. ix). Here it was defined as the logical extension of the concept of the Asia-Pacific region, a strategic arc which was “beginning to emerge, connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans through Southeast Asia” (Commonwealth of Australia 2013, p. 7) as a response to the United States' continued commitment to the region, China's sustained rise as a global power, and the emergence of India as an important strategic, diplomatic and economic actor. This was reflected in the most recent Foreign Policy White Paper's crystal-clear definition of the Indo-Pacific ‘as the region ranging from the eastern Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean connected by Southeast Asia, including India, North Asia and the United States’ (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017, p. 1). In sum, Australia's understanding of the concept is that of

*[...] an emerging Asian strategic system that encompasses both the Pacific and Indian Oceans, defined in part by the geographically expanding interests and reach of China and India, and the continued strategic role and presence of the United States in both. (Medcalf, Heinrichs & Jones, 2011, p. 56)*

Regions, as political creations not fixed by geography, are subject to reconstruction attempts that ‘can tell us a great deal about the shape and shaping of international politics’ (Hemmer & Katzenstein, 2002, p. 575). The attempt to reconstruct Asia-Pacific as the Indo-Pacific by Australia and others is a clear example of this. It could thus be argued that the Indo-Pacific idea is nothing else than an effort to create a common vision about the threats to peace and prosperity in the region, and therefore build an agenda around shared interests. Amongst these, the determination to contain a rising China, at a time in which the United States keeps pivoting to the Pacific, is perhaps the most important of them all. But the question of whether this new idea of the region could be embraced or not as a useful

construct will be addressed later for, as Barry Buzan (1998, p. 69) has warned, “if we are to consider this huge expanse as a region, then we must identify what ties it together sufficiently to justify differentiating it from the rest of the international system”.

The spectre of a not-so-peaceful rising China – Australia’s main trading partner – and an unpredictable U.S. – Australia’s most important strategic ally – under the Trump administration are a dangerous combination that might result in a perfect storm. Australia may find itself between the devil and the deep blue sea. Hence, the new Foreign Policy White Paper seems to be a sensible approach to the shifts currently taking place in the international politics of the region. But, before discussing the strategy that serves to help Australia navigate these tempestuous waters, it is important to understand its place in the imagined community of the Indo-Pacific that could arguably be on the making, as well as the role it can play in order to avoid making waves and be able to steer the ship to the safe port of a stable region.

### **Australia in the Indo-Pacific: Position, Identity, Role, and Interests**

Constructivism in International Relations claims that the identity of a state shapes its interests and therefore its actions and behaviours in the international stage. Nevertheless, this should not be understood as if ideas were the only relevant factors to understand international phenomena. As Alexander Wendt (1995) argues, even when international politics is socially constructed these structures include material resources. Therefore, Australia’s need to advocate for the Indo-Pacific as the new regional construct resides in both its material and ideational realities.

In terms of material capabilities, Australia’s place in the regional –and arguably in the international– hierarchy is immediately below the established and emerging great powers. Australia is the sixth-largest country in the world with a land area of 7,692,024 km<sup>2</sup>, a marine area of 410,977 km<sup>2</sup>, a claim of Antarctica amounting to 5,896,500 km<sup>2</sup>, and an extensive Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of 8,148,250 km<sup>2</sup> off its landmass and its remote offshore territories, and 2,000,000 km<sup>2</sup> off the Australian Antarctic Territory (Australian Government, 2018). Although this vastness is sparsely populated, with only 24,598,933 inhabitants, the country’s GDP amounts to US\$1.32 trillion, placing it thirteenth in the world (World Bank, 2018). Added to this, according to figures from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (2018), Australia ranks 7th in the region – and 13th in the world – in terms of military expenditure, below the United States, China, India, Japan, Russia, and South Korea. Furthermore, with 57,800 active military personnel and 21,100 estimated reservists, Australia possesses capable, well-trained and well-equipped armed forces, with strong doctrine, logistic support, and the capacity for deployment over long distances (International Institute

for Strategic Studies, 2017, pp. 270-271). The possession and projection of such capabilities place Australia near to the top of the international structure, making of it a serious strategic actor.

But, what is in a number? Given that these quantifiable elements only reveal the material nature of Australia, and ‘material resources only acquire meaning for human action through the structure of shared knowledge in which they are embedded’ (Wendt 1995, p. 73), it is necessary to have a glimpse at the other side of the coin which is Australia’s identity and role in the region.

Since the end of the Second World War ‘Australian foreign policy practitioners and policy-makers [...] have framed most diplomatic activity within the broad rubric of Australia’s middle power status and role in international affairs’ (Ungerer 2007, p. 539). It was actually in the San Francisco Conference that would lead to the creation of the United Nations Charter in which the then Foreign Minister, Herbert V. Evatt, used the term to advance Australia’s interests and advocate for a more prominent role in the new order that was being built, given the important contributions made by the country to the allied victory. This approach established ‘three defining characteristics of the middle power tradition in Australian foreign policy from there on: nationalism, internationalism, and activism’ (Ungerer 2007, p. 542). But, what does being a middle power mean?

Different conceptualisations of middle powers have emerged from different theoretical perspectives of International Relations. As Manicom and Reeves (2014, p. 28) suggest, realist and liberalist traditions fail to treat middle powers as independent actors in the international system and rather define them in comparison to great powers and by their role in international politics. On the other hand, constructivism offers a different assessment. By virtue of their agency to affect change at both the international and regional levels, middle powers have effectively created a precise identity that serves as the basis to explain their behaviour, which, traditionally defined, includes: a tendency toward multilateralism; the embrace of mediation or peace-building activities; the pursuit of niche diplomacy; and a predisposition to good international citizenship often reflected in building norms and institutions and following and protecting these rules, healthily informed by their own self-interest. Of course, these goals cannot be established without enough resources to pursue them, thus the archetypical middle power “possesses three characteristics: the material capability, the behavioural element, and the ideational component” (Manicom & Reeves 2014, p. 33).

Australia, being the archetype of a traditional middle power, has conceived its long-standing identity as such that it has shaped a specific set of interests that aims for a secure and resilient Australia; a secure nearer region; a stable, open, inclusive, and prosperous Indo-Pacific region; and a rules-based global order (Com-

monwealth of Australia 2016). These interests, in turn, are shaping Australia's behaviour as a power that advocates and seeks 'to protect an international order in which relations between states are governed by international law and other rules and norms' (Commonwealth of Australia 2017, p. 11), an order that seems to be challenged by the sustained rise of China.

Hence, understanding Australia's position, identity, role, and interests in the region is crucial, especially because

*as influential agents in international politics, middle powers have the potential to reshape and redirect the way in which China's ascent evolves [...] More able because of their material power capabilities to take issue with China's preferences, but less able than great powers to balance China's influence unilaterally, middle powers rely on adept diplomatic means, with an emphasis on building coalitions with like-minded powers. (Gilley & O'Neil 2014, p. 3)*

This ability of influencing the ways in which these structural changes take shape and direction confers Australia a significant role in constructing –or rather re-constructing– the regional landscape. For that reason, Australia has strategically exploited its condition to further the idea of the Indo-Pacific as a way to maintain the rules-based order that has served so well to its interests –even when that could mean hedging against a rising China. However, is there any possibility for this idea to be something more than just a strategy of contention?

### **Australia's Strategy towards the Indo-Pacific**

Australia's Foreign Policy White Paper published on late 2017 is a definite response to the events that have been transforming international politics in the last few years. It is indeed a robust document that aims to chart a course for the country at a time of rapid change in a more interconnected, interdependent, competitive, and contested world.

Perhaps the most poignant thing about the white paper is the tacit recognition of the need of having a more independent foreign policy, less uncritical and reliant on the United States and actively engaged with other powers in the region from China to Vietnam, from India to Japan, from South Korea to Indonesia, thus building on the idea of the Indo-Pacific. As a matter of fact, the first mention of this concept is a stark recognition of how globalisation has brought economic growth to the region, which has changed, in turn, the balance of power, placing China as the main competitor of the United States and challenging its position as the dominant power in the Pacific Rim. And, for Australia, that is the main cause to advance further the new concept, not because it fears the abandonment of its main strategic ally, but because an active, determined and innovative foreign policy is required in order to guarantee a strong, secure, stable, and prosperous



environment in both the Pacific and Indian Oceans. Yet, as the shadow of the apparent power struggle between China and the United States looms over the whole document, Australia's relations with both powers are given deep thought.

The alliance with the U.S. remains central to Australia's security and to its strategic and defence planning. As a result, the Commonwealth Government has vowed to broaden and deepen the alliance cooperation by increasing defence expenditure to two per cent of GDP and contributing to coalition operations that aim to maintain global and regional security. Given that the U.S. "will, for the foreseeable future, retain its significant global lead in military and soft power" (Commonwealth of Australia 2017, p. 26), its long-term interests and stabilising influence will anchor Australia's economic and security engagement in the Indo-Pacific.

Nevertheless, without making a clear mention of it, the white paper also recognises the shifts taking place in US Foreign Policy due to President Trump's America First agenda and warns that US retrenchment will only create more fertile soil for conflict, making the entire region a more unpredictable and dangerous place. By making this statement, Australia aims for a change of mind in US leadership and thus continued US presence in the Indo-Pacific:

*Australia will continue strongly to support US global leadership. The Government recognises there is greater debate and uncertainty in the United States about the costs and benefits of its leadership in parts of the international system. We believe that the United States' engagement to support a rules-based order is in its own interests and in the interests of wider international stability and prosperity. Without sustained US support, the effectiveness and liberal character of the rules-based order will decline. (Commonwealth of Australia 2017, p. 7)*

However, the stability and prosperity of the Indo-Pacific and the currently reigning rules-based order depends not just on the United States, but on its actions towards and relations with China, the other most important partner for Australia.

For the last 26 years – and counting – Australia has experienced continuous economic growth, and this bonanza has been mostly fuelled by the unrelenting rise of China and other Asian economies and their demands for Australian commodities. But economic power is also being used for strategic ends, and China's growing power and influence are starting to cause geo-economic and geopolitical competition. China is by now the most important trading partner not just for Australia but for most of the economies in both sides of the Pacific Ocean and is also a major investor in infrastructure projects, a large aid donor, and a leader in many economic integration schemes. Adding to that, China's ongoing military modernisation is rapidly improving its material capabilities with the aim of

projecting a stronger influence in the region and possibly to reshape it to suit its own interests.

But, as interests are partially the result of identities, Australia is growing anxious about China's role as a major geopolitical player with a strong capacity of influence. Australia's identity as a liberal middle-power clashes with that of China as an authoritarian great power whose intentions are to reshape the region in its own image and likeness, an assumption that can be drawn from recent declarations by President Xi Jinping at the 2018 National People's Congress about the exemplarity of the Chinese political party system and its potential contributions to the world. That is why Australia recognises that the more it engages with China the more frictions may arise from their different identities, interests, values, and political and legal systems.

Notwithstanding, this narrative of fear and greed – as Australia's policy towards China was described to the German Chancellor Angela Merkel by former Prime Minister Tony Abbott (Patience, 2018, p. 183) – cannot lead completely the bilateral relationship and thus a closer, positive, and active engagement is needed. Therefore, strengthening the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with China is paramount for the Commonwealth Government's strategy to encourage China 'to exercise its power in a way that enhances stability, reinforces international law and respects the interests of smaller countries and their right to pursue them peacefully' (Commonwealth of Australia 2017, p. 39).

Naturally, as Wilkins (2014, p. 163) argues, the rise of China has profoundly affected Australia's economic, security, and diplomatic environment due to its geographic proximity to China and its traditional close alliance with the United States. But at the same time, by virtue of this proximity, Australia has retained a strong global significance that might well live longer if Australia takes the right steps. Up to the present time, Australia has directly shaped China's foreign policy by contributing to Beijing's acceptance of the inevitability of the U.S. presence in the region, as well as indirectly through its efforts in leading multilateral initiatives in different fora, and it can continue to do so through a complex blend of traditional middle power diplomacy and peacebuilding initiatives and a more realist exercise of power balancing.

Nonetheless, the Foreign Policy White Paper is not only about China and the United States. Beyond these two important relationships, "cooperation with like-minded partners is also increasingly important to collective efforts to limit the exercise of coercive power and support an open global economy and a rules-based international order" (Commonwealth of Australia 2017, p. 7) given that Australia's ability to shape events outside its borders is limited. This is where the importance of the Indo-Pacific idea lies: as the United States is deepening its at-

tention shift to the Pacific, and China is seemingly defying the established order, Indo-Pacific democracies need to unite in order to cope with the challenges that are emerging from the competition between two major powers.

Given that shared identities build shared interests and in turn shared actions, the document places priority on positive and active bilateral and multilateral engagement with four major democracies able to influence the shape of the regional order –Japan, India, Indonesia, and South Korea–, as well as with South East Asia and New Zealand. But the highlight is especially on Japan and India.

As many indicators show, India and Japan are only second in terms of power to the United States and China, giving them a strong position in the regional structure and, hence, strong agency. That –along with the values that they share– is the reason for which both countries sit in the front rank of Australia’s international partnerships, for only through extensive and deep engagement and cooperation can maritime security be assured and thus a stable present and a prosperous future for the all countries in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. That is why the white paper insists that Australia shall remain strongly committed to the trilateral dialogues with the United States and Japan and, separately, with India and Japan, and, ‘with that in mind, it appears that the paper’s drafters sought to emphasise the Quad’ (Blaxland 2018).

Just a few days before the release of the Foreign Policy White Paper in November 2017, after a decade waiting in the wings, the United States, Japan, India, and Australia decided to meet again to re-establish the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue - famously known as Quad. The promise of the meeting was welcomed with excitement on the Australian side given the failed attempts by Australian governments to recover Indian trust after Australia’s withdrawal from the dialogue back in 2007. The likelihood of a revival of the Quad seemed even more possible due to the alignment of the stars with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, one of the most ardent proponents of the Indo-Pacific idea, in office; China being labelled as a strategic rival by the Trump administration; a more pro-United States stance in the current Indian government of Narendra Modi; and an Australia at odds with China due to recent scandals that have revealed the scope of Chinese influence in Australian politics. Yet the ambitions fell short. As Barker Gale and Shearer (2018) argue:

*While the official meeting included key issues like freedom of navigation, maritime security, and respect for international law, official readouts of the meeting differed, suggesting that strategic geography, threat perceptions, and dynamics vis-à-vis China vary among the parties. Notwithstanding these challenges, the interests of the Quad countries are converging, and this underlying structural dynamic provides a strong foundation on which the member countries can build*

*an agenda for regional cooperation. (Barker Gale & Shearer 2018, p. 30)*

Even so, as Australia aims to reinforce an open global economy and to integrate the major economies of the Indo-Pacific – whether it is through the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Forum, the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), or China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – in order to serve both its economic and strategic interests, the Quad may prove a very useful tool to achieve these objectives and limit China’s assertiveness, especially in regards to some of the fault lines pointed out by the white paper, such as the maritime and land border disputes in the South China Sea, the East China Sea, and continental Asia.

But the strength of the document lies in the fact that besides recognising the challenges ahead it also acknowledges the positive prospects that may arise from the idea of the Indo-Pacific such as an open, inclusive and prosperous region in which the rights of all states are respected, and more opportunities for business are created in order to increase the dynamism of the region, maximising the complementarity between economies in the digital era. In this sense, the Trump administration’s new Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy might be useful to reignite the idea of an Indo-Pacific Economic Corridor, already proposed by the United States, because, as Secretary of State Michael Pompeo put it, this vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific in the 21st Century aspires “to a regional order, independent nations that can defend their people and compete fairly in the international marketplace” in which the United States stands ready to enhance the security of its partners, “to assist them in developing their economies and societies in ways that ensure human dignity”, and to “help them keep their people free from coercion or great power domination” (U.S. Department of State, 2018).

How achievable an Indo-Pacific free from great power intimidation and open to attractive economic opportunities is depends mostly on how the idea of the region is constructed and this in turn can construct the identities, interests, and behaviours of all the powers in the region. In this regard, both the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and a potential economic corridor might be a positive start.

## **Conclusions**

The multiple transformations that the world has experienced in recent years are being reflected in the increasingly changing balance of power, and the Pacific Rim may be the clearest example, as the rise of China to the first rank of international politics has altered not just the material structure of its immediate neighbourhood, but also its ideational nature, going from “Asia Pacific” to “the Indo-Pacific”.

This ideational restructuring, of course, has been mostly motivated by those

countries that can take advantage of this shared idea by bringing as many powers – with different amounts of material capabilities and influence – as possible on board, some of them, countries that are not powerful enough to dictate the shape of the region but powerful enough to influence the course that this shaping process may take, countries like Australia. In that sense, this article aimed to explore first the nature of this apparent ontological change and its potential consequences; Australia's place, role, and interests in this imagined community; and how Australian foreign policy can use this new construct as a tool to advance its interests and those of the region as a whole. As the Foreign Policy White Paper points out, Australia is pursuing an opportunity, security and strength agenda that promotes cooperation on strategic, political and economic issues, reinforces peace and international law, encourages the full and active engagement of the United States in regional affairs, commits to strong and constructive ties with China, and ensures that all regional countries, large and small, have a voice on regional issues.

If Australia wants a stable region, where peace can help to sustain the growth that has brought it to the centre of the global economy and in which all countries can freely prosecute their interests without fearing the exercise of coercive power, and maximise the opportunities brought by an increasingly globalised and interdependent world, then working with partners on a shared agenda for security and prosperity is not only necessary but vital. But collective action and a shared agenda cannot come from nowhere. They must be built on the basis of shared interests that in turn have to be constructed on the basis of like-mindedness, that is, of shared values, shared identities. And that can be motivated by the idea of a region to which most of its constituent parts can feel related to, an idea like that of the Indo-Pacific. In the last decade many attempts to conceptualise the Indo-Pacific have been raised. Whether this idea has its origins in a clear effort to contain China and limit its power projection in the Pacific or not, there is a spirit that is common to all the different interpretations of the concept: the idea of the Indo-Pacific as a geopolitical amalgamation capable of bringing about freedom and prosperity as well as coexistence between different peoples with the ultimate goal of achieving global and regional stability. As Rory Medcalf (2018) states:

*The debate about how to define a region may seem largely about words, maps and history. But words, maps and history can have material potency when it comes to the decisions, behaviour and interests of states in international relations. The maps in the minds of political leaders have real-world consequences for matters of diplomacy, economics, strategic competition, peace and war. (Medcalf 2018, p.3)*

This means ideas can turn into policy, and once they do they have the ability to shape reality. It is in that core message that the usefulness and importance of the idea of a region such as the Indo-Pacific lies. If the majority of powers – whether great, middle or small – commit to these shared values and interests then, using

Winston Churchill's (1946, para. 27) appraisal of the Anglosphere in his *Sinews of Peace* speech, "there will be no quivering, precarious balance of power to offer its temptation to ambition or adventure. On the contrary, there will be an overwhelming assurance of security". By constructing and socialising this idea of the region, actors might feel restraint from abusing power and committed to achieve shared goals. Paraphrasing Churchill, we shape our regions; thereafter they shape us.

But the strategic rivalry between the United States, the dominant power, and China, the rising power, is creating a very complex environment that is making enough waves to rock the boat of prosperity. That is why, countries such as Australia need to batten down the hatches, learn the ropes, and get as many countries on board as possible by promoting this new idea of the region in order to avoid being left between the devil and the deep blue sea. In this sense, the Foreign Policy White Paper seems to be a sensible approach to this progressively contested world.

Australia's interests are clear as the distribution of power in the Indo-Pacific changes, states the document. But in order to reach those goals, collaboration with other strategic actors is crucial. As David Scott (2013, p. 443) argues, ultimately and quite simply, in the longer term, and whatever the domestic political pressures, Australia will be unable to escape the dictates of this new strategic geography that make the "Indo-Pacific concept an increasingly influential framework, a compelling strategic logic for Australia to shape its military strategy and strategic partnerships", whether they are bilateral – such as those with the U.S., Japan, China, India, Indonesia, or South Korea – or multilateral – networks and alliances such as the trilateral security dialogues with Japan and India or, most importantly, the Quad. Cooperation with these key regional powers within this conceptual framework should then remain the bedrock of Australia's foreign policy strategy for years to come and serve as an effective compass that can help its leaders to set a right and independent course, successfully sail through these dangerous waters of the Indo-Pacific, and finally reach the safe port of a stable, open, inclusive, and prosperous region.

### **Acknowledgments**

The author wishes to thank Arturo Santa-Cruz for his useful insights and comments on this paper, and Carlos Conchas and Alejandro Velázquez for the help they provided in compiling useful data and information for its completion.

### **Funding**

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## Bio

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