Australian Perceptions of the Indo-Pacific

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"Today, it makes more sense to think of the Indo-Pacific, rather than the Asia Pacific, as the crucible of Australian security."

Peter Varghese AO | Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, May 2012

“A new Indo-Pacific strategic arc is beginning to emerge, connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans through Southeast Asia....over time, Australia’s security environment will be significantly influenced by how the Indo-Pacific and its architecture evolves.”

_The 2013 Defence White Paper_
“... I believe that thinking of our region as the ‘Indo-Pacific’ better reflects the reality of Australia’s international outlook – both to the world and to Australians themselves”

The Hon. Julie Bishop | Minister for Foreign Affairs, April 2015

Re-Emergence of an Old Debate

• The Indo-Pacific region was the region of economic and strategic importance for Australia from 1788 until the beginning of World War II.
• The term emerged in Australia during the 1960s.
• ‘Indo-Pacific’ was used in a Defence Studies Project by the Australian Institute of International Affairs to assess the risk of nuclear proliferation and the responsibilities of the Commonwealth in the region.
Overview

1. Why Australia sees its region as the Indo-Pacific
2. The “two oceans” of the Australian debate
3. Limitations and problems with the Indo-Pacific concept
Why the Indo-Pacific? Internal Factors

Western Australia
Mining Boom
Asian timezone
Strategically Important
HMAS Stirling
Indian Ocean
Port Access
Resources
Why the Indo-Pacific? External Factors

- The rise of China and India
- Increased trade linking the Indian and Pacific Oceans
- Increased geographical reach of states’ interests
- Increased strategic alignments throughout Asia

Commercial ships in the Strait of Malacca
Why the Indo-Pacific?

“The Indo-Pacific power highway ... shifts [the pivot of world power] to the southern and eastern coasts of the Asian landmass. It is here that the dynamism of the world economy will course, and where rivalries and alignments that shape the way the world works will be played out.”

• Acceptance of the Indo-Pacific concept as it is a description of the current economic and strategic realities of the region

  versus

• Suspicion of the concept as designed to enhance US strategic aims and exclude China, with unforeseen consequences for Australia
Opportunity

The Indo-Pacific concept:

• Is a useful description of Australia’s region
• Focuses on developing trade links in the broader region
• Focuses on cooperation and security in the broader region
• Highlights the importance of both oceans
“In both an economic and strategic sense, the Indo-Pacific is a valid and objective description of the greater regional system in which Australia now finds itself.”

Rory Medcalf, 2012

Threat

The Indo-Pacific concept:

• Unduly raises the US’ expectations of Australia as an ally
• De-emphasises the subregional security challenges that Asia faces
• Could be perceived to promote US strategic interests and exclude China
• Potential for divergence between Australia’s perception of the Indo-Pacific and the views of other Indo-Pacific
“...the Indo-Pacific is not a natural geographical space, but rather a discursive construct that, if put into international practice, could have undesirable consequences for regional stability”

Chengxin Pan, 2015
“Fuelled by their collective anxieties about China’s growing influence in Asia, the ‘Indo-Pacific’ is not an innocent or neutral description, but is a manufactured super-region designed to hedge against a perceived Sino-centric regional order”.

Chengxin Pan, 2015

Chinese Perceptions of the Indo-Pacific

“Viewed from Beijing, the idea of the Indo-Pacific consequently appears to be to keep the United States in, lift India up and keep China out of the Indian Ocean.”

Nick Bisley and Andrew Phillips, 2012
Indian Perceptions of the Indo-Pacific

“...a stable, secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific region is crucial for our own progress and prosperity”

Dr. Manmohan Singh | Former Prime Minister, 2012

“India...[should] insist on having the ‘Asia Pacific’ label replaced by the term ‘Indo-Pacific’ which has a fare more geographically inclusive connotation”

Former Chief of Naval Staff Arun Prakash, 2009
There are three major responses ‘Indo-Pacific’ concept in India:

1. promoting an exclusionary regional order to contain China;

2. opting for an inclusive order structured on norms of multilateral engagement; and

3. promulgating the Indo-Pacific view as a means to further economic objectives while retaining the ‘strategic autonomy’ focus of foreign policy.

“...but the Indian reaction to any Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean is not just about maintaining a bargaining chip – it is much more visceral than that. There is also a sense that China is seeking to rob India of its legitimate sphere of influence in the Indian Ocean, the key building block for India’s destined status as a great power”

Dr. David Brewster
Australia and India may diverge on the extent to which China has legitimate interests in the Indian Ocean.

“it may ... be in Australia’s interests to facilitate China’s role as a responsible stakeholder in the Indian Ocean’: compared to India, Australia ‘may have a greater interest in ensuring that China’s security dilemma is not worsened”

*Dr. David Brewster*
We are in a competition for influence with China; let us put aside the moral, humanitarian, do-good side of what we believe in, and let’s just talk straight realpolitik.”

Hillary Rodham Clinton | Secretary of State, 2011
The Indo-Pacific concept is, ‘propagated by conservative practitioners and commentators concerned principally with the use of collective traditional security and hard power’.

US Perceptions of the Indo-Pacific

“...the very thing that makes the Indo-Pacific so appealing for its Australian advocates — that it makes the country a more important and geographically central ally to the United States — also opens Australia up to new and potentially costly responsibilities”.

Nick Bisley and Andrew Phillips, 2012
“China has every right to seek greater strategic influence to match its economic weight. The extent to which this can be peacefully accommodated will turn ultimately on both the pattern of China’s international behaviour and the extent to which the existing international order intelligently finds more space for China... Australia did not want to be put in the position where it had to choose between the US and China.”

*Peter Varghese AO | Secretary of DFAT, February 2013*
Conclusion

Proponents

- Is a useful description of Australia’s region
- Focuses on cooperation and security in the broader region
- Focuses on developing trade links in the broader region
- Highlights the importance of Western Australia

Opponents

- Unduly raises the US’ expectations of Australia as an ally
- Brings together disparate regions
- Could be perceived to promote some countries’ strategic interests and exclude China
Conclusion

“The ‘Indo-Pacific’ Concept places Australia at the centre of the action.”

*Prof. Brendan Taylor, The Strategist, 7 May 2013*
Conclusion

• The concept – like the region – is contaminated by rivalry between strategic powers.
• Australia may wish to take care that use of the term does not unduly exacerbate existing anxieties, mistrust and security dilemmas
• Australia should guard against the potential for divergent views and disappointed partners