

Opinion - With the Rise of the 'Indo-Pacific', Has the 'Asia-Pacific' Faded Away?

Written by Sanchari Ghosh

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2023/05/03/opinion-with-the-rise-of-the-indo-pacific-has-the-asia-pacific-faded-away/>

SANCHARI GHOSH, MAY 3 2023

Geopolitical imaginations are mental maps in which there is no one way of framing the world. Mental geographies keep on changing, often directed by power contestations. The 'Asia-Pacific' and the 'Indo-Pacific' are two such constructs that define the geopolitics of the 21st century. While the 'Asia-Pacific' and the 'Indo-Pacific' have some overlap in their geographical coverage, both have emerged under different circumstances. Asia-Pacific emerged as the dominant conception of Asia's role in the Pacific Ocean in the 1960s and was later institutionalised through the formation of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in the 1980s. However, this term was not inclusive of other important countries in the region like India and neither did it take into account the growing importance of the Indian Ocean for the world's maritime trade. It was Japan which surmised the need to accommodate both these shortcomings. This move, with support from Australia and the USA, coalesced into the formation of the concept of the Indo-Pacific.

With the rise of the Indo-Pacific as a single maritime zone and its embrace by various countries in the region, scholars suggest that Asia-Pacific has been replaced by the Indo-Pacific as the preeminent geopolitical construct in the region. However, the 2023 joint statement between China and Russia has revived the question of the relevance of Asia-Pacific as an area of interest for the big powers. This article argues that even with the Indo-Pacific's increasing popularity, the Asia-Pacific concept has not only held its ground but is here to stay. This is primarily for three reasons. First, the flux in the current world order; second, ASEAN's concern regarding its position as a central actor in the region; and third, the strong and time-tested economic dimension of the Asia-Pacific which the Indo-Pacific has yet to replicate.

The dynamics of the world order are constantly evolving, influenced by changes in the balance of power, shifting alliances and partnerships. Therefore, determining the nature of polarity is complex and highly debatable. Scholars are divided with regard to the explanation of the current global international system which is defined sometimes either as unipolar, bipolar, multipolar or bi-multipolar. During the pandemic, with the US taking a backseat and China being perceived sceptically by the international community, the geopolitical situation hinted towards multipolarity. It was argued that a 'multiplex world' was upon us. However, for many scholars, the war in Ukraine has brought bipolarity back with China and the US being the two major poles. Thus, in the current geopolitical environment, where the world is fragmented by war, economic insecurities and global tensions, it is interesting to see how the Asia-Pacific and the Indo-Pacific have become the manifestation of the great power rivalry between the US and China.

In the recent strategic agreement between China and Russia, both states promised to build an open and inclusive security system centred around the Asia Pacific. While beginning a new chapter of cooperation, both countries agreed that the Indo-Pacific has a negative impact on peace and stability, and instead pitched for an open and inclusive 'Asia-Pacific security system'. This was not the first time that China countered US's Indo-Pacific strategy. Last year too, during the visit of President Joe Biden to attend a summit of the leaders of the Quad, the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi asserted that the Indo-Pacific strategy is a ploy to encircle China and create divisions. In place of the Indo-Pacific, he argued, the Asia-Pacific should be promoted as a high ground for peaceful development.

There have been numerous instances in the past when both China and Russia expressed their individual indignation

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against the Indo-Pacific strategy. But this is the first time that both parties jointly opposed the Indo-Pacific concept. It hints towards China's efforts to forge an alternative bloc against the idea of Indo-Pacific. In this regard, Asia-Pacific is a suitable alternate conception which China will look to cultivate in the foreseeable future.

ASEAN envisions the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions as a closely integrated space with ASEAN playing a central role: a vision encapsulated by the term 'ASEAN centrality'. But thanks to the steady rise of the Indo-Pacific, the notion of ASEAN centrality has been constantly challenged. For instance, the emergence of QUAD has raised suspicion among the ASEAN states that it could disrupt the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) from its position of centrality in the region's security order. Despite reassurances from the Quad members that they are not paying mere lip service to ASEAN's centrality, the ASEAN members do not prefer substantial engagement with any grouping premised on exclusive cooperation. Additionally, the formation of the AUKUS (a grouping that strategically left out ASEAN) exposed the fissures among the ASEAN members which is evident from their divided response regarding the (de)stabilising effects of a formal military alliance in their backyard.

Moreover, increasing disunity within the ASEAN on issues like South China Sea disputes and the ongoing crisis in Myanmar reflects the ineffectiveness of its decision-making mechanisms. Due to such limitations, coupled with its preference for maintaining equidistance from major poles of influence, ASEAN does not prefer to be drawn into a great power rivalry between the US and China. For ASEAN, the Asia-Pacific and the Indo-Pacific represent two complementary zones and it is not ready to commit entirely to one in place of the other.

Notwithstanding the efforts being made by the US to strengthen economic partnerships among the member countries of the Indo-Pacific region, one of the most fundamental differences between the Asia-Pacific and the Indo-Pacific is that the former is primarily an economic conception, whereas the latter encompasses broader strategic and geopolitical considerations. There are three reasons why the economic dimension of the Asia-Pacific has not yet been replicated by the Indo-Pacific. One, frameworks like the APEC and The Regional Cooperative Economic Partnership (RCEP), which were primarily based on the principle of ASEAN centrality, helped their respective member states increase their access to new markets by promoting economic integration and playing a key role in reducing tariffs. On the other hand, the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) lacks concrete commitments from the US to provide greater access to its market. Two, while the APEC is a good example of open regionalism, the IPEF involves closed regionalism based on the logic of bloc diplomacy and exclusivity. And three, since the IPEF is not a conventional Free Trade Agreement, it has limitations in enticing its partners and securing binding commitments from them.

Thus the economic framework centred around the Indo-Pacific imagination is not only exclusive but also insufficient. It goes without saying that the Indo-Pacific region is rapidly emerging as a critical global geopolitical and economic zone. As a result of its growing importance, the region is increasingly being seen as a key driver of the global economy. At the heart of the Indo-Pacific's rise is the vision of a free, open, and inclusive region that fosters cooperation, trade, and investment while upholding the principles of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. However, to become an effective bloc, it is important that its economic frameworks reflect these values by embracing inclusivity rather than being directed against any major power. To sum up, against the backdrop of the current geopolitical circumstances, there is a tendency to view both the Asia-Pacific and the Indo-Pacific through a competitive lens, with dominant powers promoting their preferred conception and downplaying the rival conception. This underscores the point that as long as the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean continue to be theatres of strategic contests, this imagination and re-imagination of the region will persist, and one imagination is unlikely to be overhauled by another.

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