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‘Indo-Pacific’ vs ‘Asia-Pacific’: Contending Visions?

By Alan Chong & Wu Shang-su

Synopsis

President Donald Trump's first extensive visit to Asia in November 2017 ignited a public rivalry between the 'Indo-Pacific' and the 'Asia-Pacific' frames of diplomacy. However, the 'Indo-Pacific' is way behind the 'Asia-Pacific' in terms of being tried and tested.

Commentary

THE RECENT uptick in rivalry between the Trump-Abe supported idea of the 'Indo-Pacific' region and the *status quo* diplomatic circuit popularly embraced as the 'Asia-Pacific' merits analysis as to what it means for the future of Asian security.

In the past few weeks, an aspiring constellation of middle and great powers, namely the United States, India, Japan and Australia, who call themselves the Quad, have thrown down the gauntlet to the Asia-Pacific order by indirectly challenging China's Belt and Road Initiative. What does the rivalry between these two templates of trans-Asian regionalism foretell?

Asia-Pacific Rising

The idea of the Asia-Pacific is as old as the Second World War. This war had left the Indian subcontinent relatively untouched. But the tides of nationalist awakening nonetheless connected the Indian anti-colonial movements, along with a handful of Arab nationalists, to Southeast Asia, China and Japan.

Initially, an anti-colonial solidarity that joined newly decolonised states and non-state independence movements was expressed through 'Pan-Asianism', 'Asian Relations Conferences' or the 'African-Asian Conference'. The onset of the Cold War rapidly

compelled all the newly decolonized states of Asia to define their political identities and security alignments more clearly.

This momentum led to defining the Asia-Pacific as we know it. The needs of Washington's containment strategy against communism drove the Americans to initiate the Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO) and the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). Both contained the overlapping memberships of Pakistan, the United Kingdom and the United States, rendering these two regional projects the closest manifestation of an 'Indo-Pacific alignment'.

SEATO ambitiously linked Pakistan to the Philippines and Thailand, excluding all of the pro-western Middle Eastern states, while the rest of SEATO comprised US, Australasia and two European powers. Both Cold War 'Asian' alliances failed ultimately due to the divergences in strategic vision between the 'outside powers' and those contiguously located within the actual region.

Buds of Regionalism

The 'Asia-Pacific' was born incrementally after Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, and belatedly Singapore, attempted various projects for Southeast Asian regional organisations that culminated in ASEAN's establishment in 1967.

From across the Pacific, the US had in any case initiated what has become known as the 'Hub-and-Spokes' security system with the signing of the San Francisco Treaty of 1951 formally terminating the US postwar occupation of Japan and the implementation of a US-Japan security alliance.

These two 'buds' of regionalism, that is, the US 'underwriting' security against Communism through bilateral pacts with Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand and the Philippines, spearheaded the nascent Asia-Pacific regional security architecture, followed by the ASEAN driven process of setting up dialogues with the major East Asian and Australian states.

Today, we see this reality manifested in terms of the assortment of ASEAN's special dialogues with China, South Korea, Japan and the US, with a sole extension to India within South Asia, plus a purely economic-centred ASEAN-Closer Economic Relations dialogue with Australia and New Zealand.

Additionally, the overlapping 'alphabet soup' approach to creating omnibus diplomatic, economic and security regionalisms such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Forum, the ASEAN Plus Three, the ASEAN Regional Forum, the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus and the East Asia Summit, firmly anchors the centrality of the 'Asia-Pacific' as the primary diplomatic arena within Asia.

China's Belt and Road Initiative

China's ambitious infrastructure-driven plan titled the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) can be understood to be locating its 'centre of gravity' within the Asia-Pacific region since most of its start-up projects such as dam building, road building, residential

construction and high speed railway construction take place within China's southern and western neighbours' territories.

In this sense, the 'Asia-Pacific' can be said to be China-dominated through the BRI while also being pluralistic and open to inclusion of other Asian states. With developments in Central Asian railway and container hub construction, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan stand to gain valuable commercial access to the sea via Iranian ports if the BRI manages to link their major economic centres through overland routes.

In this way, the BRI may even be said to reopen an Indo-Pacific rail route by stealth with rail termini based in China. Additionally, the loudest reaffirmation of the 'Asia-Pacific' idea is the January 2018 announcement of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), taking in 11 of the original signatories of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and minus Trump's USA.

Notably, the CPTPP's current membership of Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore and Vietnam ensures that the Asia-Pacific will remain the 'hegemonic' diplomatic framework for a very long time even if China is currently not a signatory.

The Quad and Indo-Pacific leadership

The idea of the Indo-Pacific diplomatic zone could well be explained as the turn not taken after the end of World War Two in Asia. Although some news commentators have suggested that then US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton had employed the phrase 'Indo-Pacific' in 2010 and 2011 to emphasise India's importance to American interests, it was really President Trump's trip to Asia in November 2017 that raised it to prominence.

Both the president's speech as well as comments made by his National Security Adviser and Secretary of State reaffirmed a distinct emphasis in redrawing Asia's diplomatic geography.

Moreover, the link between the Trump Administration's preference for the Indo-Pacific frame and the revival of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or the Quad, is obvious. The Quad comprises a coalition of powers that are either wary or ambivalent towards China and its BRI: Australia, India, Japan and the US.

On several occasions in 2017, and again in early 2018, the Quad's ministers postulated a vision of a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy' based on respect for freedom of navigation on the seas, observance of the rule of international law, and support for inclusive economic cooperation. In mid-February 2018, Quad officials had even floated the idea that the four countries could offer to fund infrastructure projects across the Indo-Pacific and as far afield as African states bordering the Indian Ocean.

However, with the exception of Japan, both Trump's US and Modi's India have yet to burnish their credentials as either dependable or generous infrastructure builders for developing states on par with China's efforts.

Therefore, the 'Asia-Pacific' idea can boast a reliable path dependence while the 'Indo-Pacific' is merely taking baby steps. Over time, given the geographical expanse of China's BRI, the Asia-Pacific might even assimilate the 'Indo-Pacific' into developmental goals through road, rail and maritime extensions. At the heart of this rivalry, which can only benefit all of Asia's development, is a contest of credibility.

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