



TRACING THE GENEALOGY: THE HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF 'INDO-PACIFIC' IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS DISCOURSE

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Abstract:

The concept of the Indo-Pacific has emerged as a pivotal geopolitical construct in contemporary international relations, signifying a paradigm shift in how global power dynamics are understood and navigated. Historically rooted in the maritime expanse that stretches from the eastern shores of Africa to the western Pacific Ocean, the Indo-Pacific represents more than just a geographic reality; it embodies the intricate interplay of economic, strategic, and diplomatic interests of global and regional powers. This paper will explore the historical evolution of the Indo-Pacific concept, tracing its journey from a geographical term to a central element in the discourse of global strategy and power struggles.

Keywords: Indo-Pacific, Historical evolution of Indo-Pacific.

Over the last decade, there's been a noticeable shift from using "Asia-Pacific" to "Indo-Pacific" in the foreign policy vocabulary of many countries. This change signifies more than just a new name; it marks the expansion from a region to a mega-region. The Asia-Pacific concept, born in the post-Cold War era, was influenced by economic integration and enhanced security ties. However, the Indo-Pacific represents a broader, more integrated maritime space, combining the Indian and Pacific Oceans and the surrounding littoral countries. These countries are increasingly invested in upholding a rule-based order in their adjacent maritime areas. While definitions of the Indo-Pacific are still being debated, it's clear that it embodies a larger, more complex regional identity compared to the Asia-Pacific. The shift reflects significant changes in Asia, pushing towards this new, expansive understanding. However, assimilating this broad concept into a traditional regional framework presents its own set of challenges.

Various countries are revealing their unique interpretations of the Indo-Pacific, leading to significant differences in how they perceive its geographical boundaries and importance. This variety adds to the complexity of defining the Indo-Pacific. Consequently, it's crucial to understand that these individual perspectives stem from each nation's specific foreign policy needs. While these divergent views complicate the effort to find common ground, there's a shared focus on the importance of a rule-based order and how nations interact within this broader region. At the same time, the flexibility in defining the Indo-Pacific allows countries to tailor their approach to suit their own foreign and security policy requirements, influencing the ongoing discussions and strategic approaches to the region.



Throughout much of the time following the Cold War, the area was commonly referred to as the Asia-Pacific. However, it's currently experiencing a major transformation due to China's structural ascent in economic and political terms, altering its role in both regional and international contexts. Over the last thirty years, China's growth has had increasing regional and global ramifications. At the same time, India's rise is also becoming more prominent, significantly influencing the region's foreign policy focus. This has resulted in two key developments: an emphasis on the Indian Ocean and its connections to the Pacific Ocean, highlighting the substantial maritime ties between these two areas.

As India ascends in prominence, the geographical focus has shifted from the traditional Asia-Pacific to the more expansive Indo-Pacific. While these terms are often used interchangeably, they underscore the significant changes occurring within the region. Defining the Indo-Pacific is challenging due to the diverse and sometimes conflicting visions held by different countries, as noted by Heiduk and Wacker, who describe the Indo-Pacific as encompassing a range of concepts rooted in varying ideas of regional order, all emphasizing the importance of a rules-based international order. Jeffrey Wilson provides a clear perspective, suggesting that the Indo-Pacific marks a transition from economic to security priorities. He describes this as "rescaling," where political processes are redefined to include a broader spatial area. Wilson outlines three types of rescaling in the shift from Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific: geographic rescaling, which incorporates additional countries into the regional identity. He also distinguishes between minimalist and maximalist definitions of the Indo-Pacific: the minimalist view extends from India eastward to encompass the Asia-Pacific area, limiting the scope of the Indian Ocean and excluding western Indian Ocean states and those along the coasts of West Asia and Eastern Africa.

The maximalist approach of the Indo-Pacific encompasses the full Indian Ocean, both its western and eastern parts, as well as the western Pacific. Scholars like Rory Medcalf support this broader perspective, arguing that the previous Asia-Pacific concept insufficiently acknowledged India's critical role in the shifting geopolitical dynamics, with numerous countries transforming global state interactions amidst significant structural power changes.

Jeffrey Wilson further elaborates on the concept of "rescaling" to understand the Indo-Pacific's rise. He identifies two additional types: institutional rescaling, which involves expanding organizations to include new members, and functional rescaling, which shifts the region's primary focus. Unlike the Asia-Pacific, which was centered around economic integration and alignment with global trading norms like those of the World Trade Organization, the Indo-Pacific is characterized by a security-led approach. This approach is a response to the regional structural changes and security challenges, redefining the normative interstate order.

As the Indo-Pacific increasingly becomes a focal point in modern discussions, it's important to consider its historical roots, which highlight the concept's evolving nature. This perspective is particularly influenced by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's significant speech to the Indian Parliament, where he used



the "confluence of the two seas" metaphor to symbolize the interconnection between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Abe's speech was inspired by and referenced "Majma-ul-Bahrain" or "Samudra Samgamah" in Sanskrit, a work by Mughal Prince Dara Shikoh. Originally, this phrase pointed to a spiritual convergence between Sufism and Vedanta, representing a cultural blend of Islam and Hinduism. Abe adapted this metaphor to express the geopolitical unity and significance of the Indo-Pacific concept.

Prime Minister Abe's interpretation of the Indo-Pacific and India's role within it was based on two key considerations. Firstly, India's status as a major power capable of extending its influence in the Indian Ocean, and secondly, India's growing economy and potential as a significant force, particularly aligning with Japan's interests in securing the linked waters of the Indian and Pacific Oceans. This alignment was further driven by mutual concerns over China's expanding presence in these areas, highlighting the need for maritime security.

Abe's insights also coincided with evolving maritime developments, especially post the 9/11 attacks in the U.S. and subsequent American involvement in Afghanistan. This period saw the introduction of the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) by the Bush administration, aimed at preventing the spread of weapons of mass destruction. The initiative notably brought the Indian and Pacific Oceans together as a strategic entity to monitor and control the transfer of fissile materials, with early PSI exercises playing a pivotal role in connecting these maritime realms.

Gurpreet Khurana suggests that the Indo-Pacific term should be understood as a vision encompassing the broader regional dynamics. He believes "Asia" was too continent-centric and diverse, while "Asia-Pacific" failed to capture the changing structural realities. In contrast, the "Indo-Pacific" concept more accurately reflects the evolving maritime connections and regional landscape.

The idea of the Indo-Pacific can be traced back to German geopolitician Karl Haushofer, who, despite his controversial ties to the Nazi regime, focused on Asia's resurgence, coining "Indopazifischen Raum" or the Indo-Pacific space. He posited that India and China, separated by Tibet, interacted primarily through maritime routes, highlighting the historical significance of these oceanic connections.

Robert Kaplan's "Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power" further illustrates this interconnectedness, discussing how the spread of Islam from the Red Sea to Southeast Asia underscores the historical importance of these maritime routes. Kaplan delineates a geography that includes the Red Sea, Arabian Sea, Bay of Bengal, and the Java and South China Seas, emphasizing the central role these waters play in understanding historical and contemporary dynamics.

Kaplan notes that the concept of a singular, interconnected oceanic and territorial region has been gaining traction. He suggests that the Cold War artificially divided the broad Indian Ocean area into distinct sectors like the Middle East (West Asia), South Asia, and the Pacific Rim. Historically,



however, this region was seen as a cohesive entity, unified by the Indian Ocean. As China and India rise in prominence, the perceived divisions between these sub-regions are diminishing, highlighting the Indian Ocean's unifying role.

Kaplan describes this notion as the 'greater Indian Ocean,' stretching from the Horn of Africa, across the Arabian Peninsula, to the Indian subcontinent, and extending to the Indonesian archipelago and beyond. This expansive area, he argues, rightly constitutes what we now understand as the Indo-Pacific, emphasizing its vast geographic and strategic scope.

Echoing Kaplan's perspectives, Southeast Asian historian Anthony Reid highlights the historical significance of the maritime regions of the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Through his works, "Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce" and "A History of Southeast Asia: Critical Crossroads," Reid explores the dynamism of Southeast Asia, or Nusantara, focusing on its vital role in trade and cultural exchange before colonial influences, especially noting the crucial spice trade. He connects the historical developments of this pivotal area to the modern concept of the Indo-Pacific.

Historically, this region has been known by various names. Europeans called it the Indian Archipelago or InsullIndia, reflecting its island nature beyond the Indian subcontinent. Others, like Reginald May, labeled it Indochina, signifying a space influenced by the fluctuating cultural dominances of India and China. This area was seen as under a 'bamboo curtain,' where the cultural impacts of these two civilizations varied, shifting the cultural balance east or west depending on the prevailing influence at the time. Additionally, scholars like Frecon and Meijer use the term Australasia to describe the area extending between India and Australia, further indicating the diverse nomenclature and significance of this region in the broader Indo-Pacific context.

Kaplan discusses how the monsoon winds of the Indian Ocean were crucial for trade and cultural exchanges long before modern technology. These winds facilitated connections across the entire Indian Ocean, reaching eastward to the South China Sea and its surrounding nations. Historian Sugata Bose, in "A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire," emphasizes the significance of these winds in linking major trading hubs from India and China to the Arab world and Persia.

Bose credits the monsoon winds for enabling these enduring connections over two millennia, fostering a cohesive yet diverse cultural and commercial landscape across the region. He notes the emergence of a regional "cosmopolitanism," influenced by trade, cultural interactions, and religious pilgrimages like the Haj. This cosmopolitan nature underlined the deep-seated ties among the communities along these coastal areas.

In the 1920s and 1930s, Karl Ernst Haushofer, a University of Munich professor, was a prominent advocate of viewing states as living organisms and explored the intersection of geography and politics. He focused on a region he termed the "Indopazifischen" or Indo-Pacific. Haushofer considered this area a "political living space" primarily influenced by maritime dynamics, as the formidable natural barriers



of Tibet and the Himalayas limited land-based interactions between the Indian subcontinent, East Asia, and the Western Pacific. Instead, he saw the Indo-Pacific as a cohesive geopolitical entity unified by the sea. Having spent time in Japan, Haushofer believed that the country's rise positioned it to lead what he called the "Pan-Pacific," expanding into a broader living space driven by Japanese influence. He argued that the union of the Indian and Pacific Oceans provided a powerful tool for Asian nations, essentially forming an "arsenal of Pacific geopolitics."

Haushofer's interpretation of the Indo-Pacific (IP) was notably focused on Japan as an emerging, ambitious nation with aspirations of hegemony, possessing both the means and resolve to politically unify what he viewed as a geographically cohesive area. While his analysis might not be as detailed as that of Mahan, Haushofer is recognized for being one of the first to explicitly introduce the concept of the Indo-Pacific in geopolitical discourse.

From the late 1960s through the early 21st century, the Asia-Pacific was a focal point, seen as a link between Northeast and Southeast Asia, Oceania, the Americas, and particularly centered around a U.S.-led alliance network established post-1945. This regional order, less institutionalized and multilateral than Europe's, primarily operated through a series of bilateral relationships between the U.S. and key regional countries, described as a "hub-and-spoke system." The U.S. committed to defending allies like the Philippines, South Korea, and Japan, and maintained a significant, albeit limited, set of agreements assuring military support for Taiwan.

Post-Cold War, the U.S. has increasingly supported multilateral security efforts in Asia, endorsing organizations like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the East Asia Summit (EAS), and revitalizing broader security initiatives like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue with Japan, Australia, and India. Additionally, it has enhanced security ties with other regional players like Thailand, Vietnam, Pakistan, Singapore, and India, moving beyond its earlier bilateral focus.

It wasn't until the late 2000s that the term Indo-Pacific (IP) was specifically mentioned. During a 2007 visit to India, Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo addressed the Indian Parliament, drawing inspiration from a 19th-century Indian spiritual leader to talk about the future "confluence of the two seas" – the Pacific and Indian Oceans. Abe envisioned Tokyo and New Delhi forging an "Arc of Freedom and Prosperity" within a "broader Asia," which included the United States and Australia, centered on a strategic partnership between Japan and India. The scope of cooperation between Japan and India was extensive, covering areas like defense, economy, diplomacy, development, technology, education, energy, environment, and culture. While Abe did not directly mention the IP, his speech hinted at many ideas that would later be incorporated into the concept. Following 2007, the Indo-Pacific notion gradually entered the political and strategic dialogue among various Asian entities, albeit with notable variations.

The Indo-Pacific concept, while widely accepted, faces challenges. There are concerns about the potentially divisive nature of this concept, especially in relation to China's regional ambitions. The



varying interpretations of what constitutes the Indo-Pacific and how it should be managed also pose challenges to creating a cohesive strategy. Moreover, issues like maritime disputes, trade tensions, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic have added layers of complexity to the Indo-Pacific discourse. The region is not just a stage for geopolitical rivalry but also a space for economic cooperation, environmental conservation, and cultural exchange.

The evolution of the Indo-Pacific concept from a geographic expression to a central element of global strategy reflects the changing contours of international relations. It underscores the region's growing economic and strategic significance and the interplay of major powers' interests. As the 21st century progresses, the Indo-Pacific will likely continue to be a dynamic and crucial part of the global order, shaping the policies and priorities of regional and global players alike. Understanding the historical evolution of the Indo-Pacific is vital for comprehending the current dynamics and anticipating future trends. As a geopolitical concept, it is continuously shaped and reshaped by the forces of economics, security, and diplomacy, making it a fascinating and essential element of international relations and strategic studies.

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