CHAPTER 4

Indo-Pacific: The Reconstruction of a Region

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The Indo-Pacific represents a new conceptualization of who and what constitutes Asia. Australia, India, Japan, and the United States are its main proponents. The Indian Ocean region and the Asia-Pacific are understood as one contiguous area. Although the new concept’s trajectory remains unclear, the transition from the hitherto used “Asia-Pacific” is associated with four overarching trends: a shift from an economy-to a security-dominated agenda, bottom-up to top-down regionalism, multilateralism to minilateralism, and including to excluding China.
The Indo-Pacific is a loosely defined and contested idea that spans an extensive and so far fragmented geographic area – the Indian Ocean region and the Asia-Pacific. According to a key Australian strategy paper, the Indian Ocean has replaced the Atlantic as the world’s busiest and most strategically significant trade corridor,¹ “making the Indo-Pacific the world’s economic and strategic center of gravity.”² In the context of competing ideas of regional order, the Indo-Pacific is increasingly displacing the hitherto common concept of the Asia-Pacific. The 30-year-old Asia-Pacific framework today represents an integrated strategic system, characterized by deep economic interdependencies, multilateral governance structures, and security alliances.³ However, this cannot be said of the Indian Ocean region.

The Indo-Pacific idea has gained traction over the past decade as it has acknowledged ongoing geopolitical shifts in Asia. The seven-decades-long consensus behind the “Pax Americana,” the system of order in Asia dominated by the United States, and the institutional linkages that constituted the Asia-Pacific are eroding. Uncertainties surrounding US leadership in the region and the rise of China are fundamentally changing the region’s economic, political, and military balance of power. The Indo-Pacific represents a regional reconstruction driven by Australia, India, Japan, and the United States that challenges the previous widely shared conceptualization of the Asia-Pacific. India is, for example, a central node of the emerging framework – demonstrating its growing capabilities and its return into the strategic architecture of Asia.

This chapter argues that there are four major shifts associated with the gradual transition from Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific. These also reflect the strategic priorities of the new concept’s main advocates. First, a geostrategic logic with a focus on security issues dominates the Indo-Pacific agenda, as opposed to a previously prevalent economic rationale. Second, policymakers, strategists, and government representatives are at the forefront of promoting the Indo-Pacific, whereas the Asia-Pacific has generally been popularized from the bottom up, with a solid ideational foundation in expert communities. Third, proponents of the Indo-Pacific show a growing preference for minilateral as opposed to multilateral solutions, neither building on nor seeking deeper economic and political integration. Fourth, they are also increasingly favoring a regional architecture that excludes or at least opposes China more than was the case in the recent past.
The Indo-Pacific represents a fluid concept whose characteristics and consolidation remain works in progress. The US Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy attempts to offer an alternative to a China-centric reordering of the region, such as the one suggested by Beijing’s large-scale infrastructure development project, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Australia and Japan were the early promoters of the Indo-Pacific (see timeline). They depend on the US military presence in the region for their security. India, a non-US military ally and a nuclear power in its own right, has only been willing to embrace the Indo-Pacific more openly since the significant escalation of border tensions with China in 2020. Hence, the future of the Indo-Pacific framework will depend on the foreign policy trajectory of the United States and its regional partners, on China’s behavior, and on whether and how the idea can be institutionalized. Concrete manifestations of the new concept include, among others, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), an informal alliance among Australia, India, Japan, and the United States, and AUKUS, the trilateral security partnership among Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

There have been several reactions from other actors, including in Europe, to the emergence of the Indo-Pacific framework. Beijing rejects the concept, perceiving it primarily as a US-led containment strategy directed against China. In 2018, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi compared the Indo-Pacific idea to “sea foam … [which] may get some attention, but soon will dissipate.” Most Asian countries need to walk a fine line between US pressure to adopt the construct and the vehement opposition by China (and Russia). In 2019, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) adopted its own Indo-Pacific strategy. In Europe, France (2019), Germany (2020), the Netherlands (2020), and the EU (2021) have embraced the Indo-Pacific, too.

The objective of this chapter is to highlight the structural implications of the transition from the idea of an Asia-Pacific to an Indo-Pacific on Asian regionalism and to illustrate the related ramifications for strategic relations in and with Asia. The chapter first outlines how and why a region – in this case, the Indo-Pacific – is being “reconstructed.” It then describes the four major shifts associated with the transition to the Indo-Pacific. What follows is a discussion of how these trends – by creating new obstacles and opportunities – affect the region itself, great-power dynamics, and the form and content of European engagement in Asia.
Key Strategy Documents and References to the Indo-Pacific

Japan “Confluence of the Two Seas”-speech by Shinzo Abe in India

US Speeches and written commentaries by Hillary Clinton

Japan Essay on Asia’s Democratic Security Diamond by Shinzo Abe

Australia 2013 Defence White Paper
Redefining Asia

Geographic concepts such as the Asia-Pacific or Indo-Pacific are socially constructed. The endeavor to create politically defined and organized regions, with institutions being a key manifestation of this attempt, can be described as regionalism. Based on political and ideological drivers, “mental maps” are formulated to arrive at a vision of regional order. Former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe stated in 2007 that “the Pacific and the Indian Oceans are now bringing about a dynamic coupling as seas of freedom and of prosperity” and thereby launched the idea of the Indo-Pacific. The United States, Australia, and India also subsequently began to incorporate the term into their foreign and security policy language. Instrumental for the concept’s increasing acceptance was former US President Donald Trump’s vision of a “free and open Indo-Pacific” in 2017. Today, the term Asia-Pacific has been systematically replaced in official Australian, Indian, Japanese, and US documents. The Biden administration has fully adopted the FOIP concept, and it published its own Indo-Pacific strategy in early 2022.

The idea of the Indo-Pacific is more than simply a geographic extension of the Asia-Pacific. It represents a new conceptualization of which countries the region includes (adding the nations of the Indian Ocean region), where the key hubs of regional power reside (Australia, India, Japan, and the United States), and what issues and interdependencies drive regional cooperation and institutions (security challenges). This transforms the previous foundations of Asian regionalism. When regions are reconstructed, first, spatial governance structures shift to reflect new geographic interdependencies, membership, and institutions. Second, the purpose and form of policymaking alters as it functions at new spatial scales, follows new logics, and addresses new topics. The combination of new actors, governance mechanisms, and issues always favors certain interests over others.

Although the Indo-Pacific idea cannot be equated with the strategies and visions of individual countries, their comparison provides insight into what countries understand by the concept and for what purposes they intend to use it. The Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean are imagined as one contiguous maritime area, as important sea lines of communication (SLOCs) connect the littorals of the two oceans – the majority of the world’s flows of goods traverse them. All of the actors refer to the importance of the “rules-based order” and international norms. By contrast, differences exist among them with respect to the geographic
extent of the Indo-Pacific, the degree to which China should be contained, and the focus on or weighting of different policy fields.\textsuperscript{12}

Several explanations exist for why the Indo-Pacific concept has gained traction in the last decade. Following a realist logic, the Indo-Pacific framework is a balancing strategy against a rising China and an attempt to hedge vis-à-vis a potentially diminishing regional role of the United States. The new framework shifts the regional focus by including India as a counterweight to China and by centering on maritime issues. A liberal approach emphasizes the growing economic, political, and strategic ties between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. Therefore, the Indo-Pacific here can be understood as an institutional setting to further facilitate cooperation in a larger conceived region. In contrast, a constructivist lens highlights the importance of norms, identities, and values – particularly democratic values – that contribute to the emergence of the Indo-Pacific.

The Four Shifts

For more than 30 years, the Asia-Pacific has provided a widely shared geopolitical understanding regarding the fundamentals of cooperation in and with Asia. Regional integration in Asia gained momentum after the end of the Cold War, was driven by economic considerations, and was facilitated by the US-sponsored security system. The establishment of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum in 1989 signified the recognition of the Asia-Pacific as a “key symbol of political geography that defined a state’s economic and foreign policy interests.”\textsuperscript{13} This shared perception has also facilitated ASEAN-driven regionalism, resulting in a web of economic, political, and security ties among countries of Southeast Asia, East Asia, and the Pacific Rim. These include the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the ASEAN Plus Three (APT), and the East Asia Summit (EAS) (see figure). However, for reasons discussed above, the Asia-Pacific no longer constitutes a viable frame of reference for several actors, particularly the Quad states (Australia, India, Japan, and the United States). This section discusses the four overarching trends that can be associated with the transition to the Indo-Pacific regarding the future of regionalism in Asia.

Shift 1: From the primacy of economy to the primacy of security. Economic issues have provided the basis for Asia-Pacific cooperation. The foundational objectives of APEC have been, among others, sustaining growth and development, deepening regional economic integration, and strengthening
Institutional Arrangements in Asia
Asia-Pacific Multilaterals and Indo-Pacific Minilaterals (Selection)

- ASEAN-led institutions
- Asia-Pacific economic institutional arrangements
- Indo-Pacific minilaterals

* The Quad was suspended from 2008 to 2017.
the multilateral trading system. ASEAN-led regionalism, reinforced by the creation of APEC, has resulted in a multitude of multilateral institutions with a focus on economic issues. Trade and investment liberalization has been the main contribution of ASEAN to regional cooperation. Certain formats, such as the ARF, also address security issues, but they have emerged in the wake of economic integration.

In contrast, security issues are placed at the core of the way proponents frame and justify both the Indo-Pacific concept and the orientation of emerging institutions. The concept’s four principal advocates, Australia, India, Japan, and the United States, have conceptualized the Indo-Pacific as a maritime security region that is increasingly contested. Growing maritime interdependencies – SLOCs – are perceived as the critical connections between the Indian and Pacific oceans. Various traditional and non-traditional security challenges appear to threaten the openness of these important shipping routes. Such challenges include Chinese artificial island-building in the South China Sea, Chinese naval military modernization, territorial disputes, and piracy.

The Quad, the format most regularly associated with the Indo-Pacific, seeks to promote, among other things, a free, open, rules-based order; freedom of navigation and overflight; the peaceful resolution of disputes; and the territorial integrity of states. Since its initiation in 2007, and particularly following its revival in 2017, the Quad has served as a mechanism for security dialogue. More recently, the Quad has expanded its scope to include a focus on coordinating efforts in infrastructural investment, vaccine diplomacy, supply chain resilience, and technology standards. It no longer wants to be perceived as merely a security format. However, the Quad continues to follow a clear “soft-balancing” logic vis-à-vis China. Trilateral dialogues and initiatives among Australia, India, Japan, and the United States are motivated by and concentrate on security. The inaugural meeting of the Australia-India-Japan high-level dialogue in 2015 centered on regional maritime security, which continues to be a key issue of the trilateral. The India-Japan-US ministerial dialogue, also launched in 2015, resulted in the inclusion of Japan in India’s Malabar naval exercise.

The economic dimension of Indo-Pacific cooperation has so far remained secondary. Whether this will change with the promise by the United States to launch an “innovative new” economic framework in 2022 is an important but open question.
To date, the United States seems to have followed an approach that treats the economy and security as distinct spheres. Further, the economic pillar of the US FOIP has been limited to modest investments, the coordination of infrastructure expenditure with other actors, and attempts to exclude China from supply chains.

This contrasts with the rationale of most countries that growing economic linkages across the Indian and Pacific oceans lie at the heart of the emergence of the new concept. However, economic ties between South Asia and the Asia-Pacific, for instance, are underdeveloped (see figure below). The Indian subcontinent is home to some of the least open economies in the world, resulting in low economic integration. Moreover, new regional trade and economic liberalization agreements – the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) – do not reflect the Indo-Pacific idea, as they exclude South Asia and the United States (see figure above).

Shift 2: From bottom-up to top-down regionalism. Japan, Australia, and to a lesser extent the United States have been the driving forces behind both the Asia-Pacific and Indo-Pacific concepts. Whereas bottom-up approaches have been decisive in popularizing and institutionalizing the Asia-Pacific in the region, the Indo-Pacific is instead driven top-down, as its promotion and execution are spearheaded by policymakers and governments.

A widely accepted view among regionalism experts is to see the form and combination of leadership as a main explanatory factor in the emergence of regional institutions. Two forms of leadership can be distinguished. Executive leadership is essential in addressing operational difficulties inherent in interstate cooperation, such as collective action. It emphasizes the top-down capability of states. Ideational leadership, by contrast, is necessary to help states identify common interests and benefits from cooperation. It is a bottom-up force driven by individuals and expert communities. Depending on the combination of these two forms of leadership, different types of institutions emerge. Institutions, in turn, contribute to the recognition and acceptance of political ideas and concepts.

Asia-Pacific regionalism is an example of strong ideational and weak executive leadership, resulting in slow and thin institutionalization. The idea was based on a solid intellectual foundation, as it was proposed by Australian and Japanese economists.
who shared similar visions and goals on trade, economic liberalization, and regionalism. However, it took over two decades of developing and consolidating the idea for it to start having an impact on the policy community in the 1980s. The Japanese and Australian governments conducted “quiet diplomacy” to get regional states on board to engage in regional economic cooperation, and refrained from officially endorsing the proposals emerging from the community. The slow process of Asia-Pacific consolidation was also related to the Soviet Union’s strong opposition to Asia-Pacific economic cooperation, which only changed after 1986.
Executive leadership was weak in promoting the Asia-Pacific framework. As they were constrained by national concerns, the United States and Japan refrained from taking on dominant roles. Australia attempted to fill the gap left by the absence of the other two. However, due to insufficient material power and resources, Canberra was unable to convince other member states to sacrifice some of their sovereign rights for the sake of deepening economic cooperation. As a consequence, APEC today has a non-binding and consensus-based decision-making character.

In contrast, executive leadership behind the Indo-Pacific framework has the potential to be strong but the idea is so far lacking a solid, widely shared ideational foundation. The United States would have the means necessary to take a leadership role in overcoming the operational difficulties involved in interstate cooperation in Asia. If US rhetoric were matched with political and economic resources, then Washington could significantly advance the institutionalization of the Indo-Pacific.

Up to now, ideational leadership in advancing the Indo-Pacific concept has been relatively weak. The Indo-Pacific is a “broad and loosely defined idea” that could include action on everything from security to climate change to vaccine diplomacy. There is no shared understanding of the geographic demarcation of the region covered by the term. In addition, the Quad countries promote the concept for different strategic reasons. What unites most states in the region is a shared threat perception concerning China rather than any common interests or notions of cooperation. Further, due to China’s resistance to the idea, medium-sized and smaller Asian nations approach it with caution.

As a result, state governments, particularly those in Australia and Japan, seem to be more enthusiastic about the Indo-Pacific than scholars. These governments have also been attempting to create an “Indo-Pacific identity for the region.” Expert communities, such as in India and Australia, have long been divided about the Indo-Pacific, though the idea has been gaining traction recently. Nevertheless, Australian economists still appear hesitant about joining the discussion about the Indo-Pacific. What follows from this combination of strong executive leadership and weak ideational leadership are loose minilateral formats, embodied, for instance, by the Quad.

Shift 3: From multilateralism to minilateralism. Security and economic cooperation in the Asia-Pacific has been
conducted primarily on a multilateral (and bilateral) basis. This is something that is reflected in the complex web of institutions in the region, which nevertheless have some degree of efficiency and coordination. These institutions also reveal the aversion in the region to anything that could threaten national sovereignty, which in part results from historical experiences with European imperialism. Further, some regional experts argue that the US development of a hub-and-spoke security architecture in the post-World War II era entrenched ideological divisions and prevented deeper integration.

Multilateral Asia-Pacific institutions are increasingly subject to question not only by the Indo-Pacific’s main advocates but also by others. The “ASEAN way” has been widely criticized as “making process, not progress,” especially in dealing with security issues such as the South China Sea disputes. Further, China’s alleged interference through member states such as Laos and Cambodia calls into question ASEAN’s neutrality and independence. The growing view among the Quad states is that minilaterals – formats that occupy the space between bilateralism and multilateralism – are “better than relying on a single fragmented regional organisation that provides little by way of options and solutions in dealing with the regional challenges.” However, this contrasts with “ASEAN centrality,” which most actors refer to in their Indo-Pacific strategies.

Under the Indo-Pacific concept, a growing body of minilateral initiatives are emerging that complement and compete with the existing regional architecture. Minilaterals are flexible and functional, and membership is deliberately limited. While all the Quad states prefer minilateralism in the area of security, Australia and Japan are open to multilateral approaches in the economic domain. This is reflected in the recent conclusion of the RCEP and CPTPP trade and economic liberalization agreements. Indo-Pacific minilaterals include, among others, the Quad; the AUKUS security partnership; India-Japan-US cooperation, which has involved ministerial-level meetings since 2015; and the Australia-India-Japan trilateral, which has been held since 2015 and produced results in the form of the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative in April 2021.

At the same time, Asia-Pacific multilateral institutions – including those that would reflect Indo-Pacific membership, such as the ARF or the EAS – are becoming increasingly marginalized. India joined the ARF in 1996 and was a founding member of the
EAS in 2005. The Australian analyst Rory Medcalf, one of the concept’s leading advocates, stated that the establishment of the EAS comes “as close as anything to the moment the contemporary Indo-Pacific was born.”28 However, the Trump administration (2017–2021) in particular sidelined these multilaterals. It remains to be seen whether the Biden administration’s efforts to reverse this trend will be successful.

Shift 4: From inclusion to exclusion of China. The current Indo-Pacific framework, as established by the Quad states, seems to exclude China. However, there are significant differences in how Australia, India, Japan, and the United States position themselves vis-à-vis Beijing. China is a member of most Asia-Pacific institutions, such as APEC, the APT, the ARF, and the EAS, but absent from existing and emerging Indo-Pacific minilaterals (see figure). This mirrors a shift from inclusive to exclusive institutional balancing. Both strategies represent a way to maintain a state’s power and influence in the international system.29 By including a respective state, it can be constrained by the rules and principles of the institutions. Exclusive institutional balancing, on the other hand, allows states within the institutions to act together to counter the excluded state. Until recently, it seemed unlikely that exclusive institutional balancing would materialize in the region. This was because of India’s hesitancy to formally balance against China and the lack of shared threat perceptions of China among Asian countries. This has changed significantly in recent years and especially since Sino-Indian border tensions escalated in 2020. This escalation led to clashes between the Chinese and Indian armed forces that resulted in the border dispute’s first deaths in more than four decades.

From the US perspective, the “engagement policy” toward China has failed. Washington also fears that an endorsement of Chinese-led initiatives would likely increase Beijing’s power and influence in regional and international affairs. The initiatives being pursued under the Indo-Pacific framework seek to provide an alternative to a possible China-centric reordering of the region and to serve as a counter-narrative to China’s growing influence in Asia. The FOIP is often portrayed as the US answer to China’s BRI. It also provides a strategic rationale for extending Washington’s strategic cooperation beyond its hub-and-spoke system.30 The emergence of the Indo-Pacific concept likewise reflects the anxieties about a shifting regional balance of power in Australia and Japan, where the idea originated. In Australia’s case, this threat perception
has intensified significantly with China’s aggressive response to Canberra’s call for an independent investigation into the origin of COVID-19 in 2020.

**New Parameters for Cooperation and Conflict**

The Indo-Pacific framework is both a consequence and a driver of great-power competition. Whereas the Asia-Pacific framework rose during the US post-Cold War “unilateral moment,” when interstate relations were largely characterized by economic cooperation, the Indo-Pacific construct reflects the current era, marked by increased confrontation between the United States and the rising global superpower, China. US and regional partners’ initiatives under the Indo-Pacific concept seek to change what they perceive as the deficiencies of the current regional architecture. At the same time, the emerging Indo-Pacific construct pushes other countries in the region to position themselves in the US-China strategic competition. This section analyzes the strategic opportunities and challenges that the policy-driven shifts under the construct create for Asian states and extra-regional actors.

From the perspective of the United States and its regional partners, the transition from a focus on economic to security issues (shift 1), and particularly to maritime security, highlights a dimension in which the United States is still dominant and holds a comparative advantage over China. In the economic realm, the US ability to shape the regional order has markedly declined due to growing domestic opposition to free trade and China’s increasingly strong economic position in the region. The focus on maritime security provides the United States with new opportunities, such as the potential to strengthen engagement with the Indian Ocean region – an area in which it previously lacked the strategic ties to possess regional order-shaping capabilities. For India itself, the maritime turn is rather new, as the country traditionally had a continental security focus. In the cases of Australia and Japan, the emphasis on maritime security aligns well with their self-identification as maritime states. In addition, the framework may affect the balance of power within Southeast Asia in Washington’s interest by tipping it in favor of maritime states, such as Indonesia and Singapore, and away from continental states, such as Cambodia and Laos, that are more tightly bound in Beijing’s orbit.

Among Asian states, a widespread concern exists over the prospect of an increasingly polarized order, to which a security-driven regionalism may contribute. The Indo-Pacific
framework expands the geographic scope of the Asian region, but the re-focusing on security issues that comes with it narrows the themes and dimensions of interaction among countries. Without an economic pillar and a more explicit multi-dimensional approach, the Indo-Pacific framework risks pushing countries of the region to choose between security and other interests. In particular, the economic interests of South Korea and many of the Southeast Asian states could be adversely affected, as their economies are increasingly centered around China’s. These countries thus want to avoid tensions in their relations with Beijing. At the same time, they see long-term partnership with the United States as an important counterweight to China’s growing dominance in Asia.

The Indo-Pacific concept is unifying actors worldwide that share a strategic concern over Chinese actions. However, so far it does not – unlike Asia-Pacific regionalism – build on a broadly shared interest in deeper integration within the region (shift 2). Regional cooperation under the framework has an ad hoc character. Consequently, the success of the framework will depend on the sustained commitment of its proponents. For it to expand and deepen further, the framework would need to go beyond addressing the selective interests of its proponents, which include the strengthening of their own positions in the region, and to broaden out to resonate better with the views of other regional actors.

The rise of the Indo-Pacific concept is also related to growing ambitions for regional leadership by Australia, Japan, and India. Stronger strategic cooperation among the three countries, as well as with extra-regional actors, will help them hedge against weakening US leadership in the region. At the same time, the Indo-Pacific framework keeps the United States engaged. Australia and Japan, which are US military allies, continue to depend for their security on Washington. Indeed, 55,000 US soldiers are stationed in Japan alone. However, in contrast to Australia, for example, some Southeast Asian states do not see the United States as a moral and benign actor per se. Instead, they see it as an actor that, like China, may destabilize the regional order through its confrontational behavior. Illustrative examples of such relatively skeptical positions among Southeast Asian states include their reactions to the announcement of AUKUS in September 2021. Indonesia, for example, an early adopter of the Indo-Pacific terminology, expressed a deep concern over the arms race and rise in conflict in the region following the announcement.
The rise of minilaterals (shift 3), such as the Quad or AUKUS, reflects and adds to the growing complexity and burden-sharing in Asia’s security order today. The Asia-Pacific could build on the US bilateral alliance system of the post-World War II era. This hub-and-spoke security network clearly defined the hierarchy and relations among states and, motivated by Washington’s preference, contributed to the marked security bilateralism observable in the region. The current Indo-Pacific construct, by contrast, is led by several countries, including India, with which the United States does not maintain a military alliance. Within this framework, numerous actors with varying and sometimes competing ambitions, interests, and ideas are trying to shape the regional order. From a US perspective, minilateral cooperation formats provide opportunities to engage with its regional treaty allies as well as with old and new partners that are willing and able to cooperate in specific issue areas.

The flexible, non-institutional character of minilateral cooperation formats constitutes, at the same time, a limitation on cooperation within the Quad context. In contrast to Australia or Japan, India does not have strongly developed military and institutional ties with the United States. This provides Washington with a reduced degree of leverage over Delhi’s foreign and security policies. The extent and depth of Quad cooperation, therefore, critically depends on the willingness of India. As a result, the Quad has settled into focusing on non-traditional security issues, including cooperation in the fields of technology, climate change, and pandemic response. India’s case also illustrates how minilaterals, or more specifically their mutually non-exclusive character, can help states keep options open in terms of partnerships. In late 2021, India took part in the Russia-India-China (RIC) trilateral cooperation meeting, which aimed at strengthening cooperation among the three participants.

Reservations exist especially among small- and medium-sized Asian states that the Indo-Pacific framework may have an undermining effect on multilateralism in the region and, more specifically, erode the coherence and influence of ASEAN. Southeast Asian states are committed to ASEAN centrality and value the agency that the platform provides them in regional matters. However, among the Indo-Pacific’s main proponents, only Australia and Japan favor multilateral solutions in the economic sphere, with India and the United States preferring bilateral solutions. In the sphere of security, all of the Quad states prefer minilaterals. “Quad
Plus” cooperation arrangements—such as those started with New Zealand, South Korea, and Vietnam in 2020 to coordinate COVID-19 approaches—also have a minilateral nature.

On the positive side, minilateral cooperation arrangements may help overcome strained bilateral ties among Asian states. A case in point is the Five Power Defence Arrangements, a consultative defense mechanism through which Malaysia and Singapore cooperate in partnership with Australia, New Zealand, and the UK. More generally, minilateral formats may introduce new dynamism in policy fields where regional cooperation was previously blocked or moving slowly.

The Indo-Pacific concept is still evolving, but as of today, US-led regional cooperation under the framework excludes China (shift 4). The framework is not about overcoming divisions among Asian sub-regions. In fact, its new institutional features, such as minilaterals, could possibly accelerate the fracturing tendencies of an already divided Asia. In addition, competitive politics could make compromise and reconciliation even more difficult. More inclusive perspectives on the Indo-Pacific include those promoted by ASEAN or the EU. However, these are not currently dominant. In US and Japanese interpretations of the Indo-Pacific, countering a China-centric view of the Asian order is a particularly prominent feature. India is also supportive of this purpose, even though it promotes a more multipolar view of the region and, like other countries, sees the Indo-Pacific as more of a geographic condition.

The United States has declared the Indo-Pacific to be the central geographic arena in its strategic competition with China. Hence, it wants to secure its dominant position in the region. A defining feature of Asia’s regional order today is the coexistence of multiple and (at times) inconsistent orders, which reflects the changing balance of power. In this context, states are aiming at defining a new order, but no agreement exists as to what kind of order or which rules should apply. Illustrative of this is the rejection by Asian and European states of China’s claims in the South China Sea. They see these claims as inconsistent with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)—a position that was supported by a 2016 international court ruling. In interactions among actors in Asia today, elements of cooperation and compliance with existing norms and processes exist side-by-side with elements of contestation. Hence, it is difficult on a conceptual basis to distinguish between status quo and revisionist
positions. What role could or should Europe play in such a context?

**What Place for Europe?**

European states’ interest in the Indo-Pacific framework reflects a growing awareness of cross-regional strategic interdependencies and the global relevance of the rules and processes that are being renegotiated under the concept. At the same time, it is also a response to the Quad states’ initiatives, including US pressure on European states to engage more. The first time the Indo-Pacific terminology was used in an official EU document was in the EU-Japan Connectivity Partnership of September 2019. The most proactive EU member states are France, Germany, and the Netherlands. They are pursuing a coordinated European engagement with the Indo-Pacific, one which will involve the EU playing an enhancing and coordinating role. However, except for the area of trade policy, where it has far-reaching exclusive competence, the EU will have to rely on coalitions of the willing and capable among its member states for concrete action.

With its overseas territories that are home to 1.5 million French citizens and 8,000 soldiers, France is the only European “resident power” in the region, and it was the first to champion the idea of an Indo-Pacific framework. The post-Brexit UK has also shown new ambitions to step up its strategic engagement in the region, aiming to become the “European partner with the broadest and most integrated presence.” However, Indo-Pacific issues are no longer seen as being first and foremost about French and UK naval presence in the South China Sea, as other European actors have started developing their own strategic approaches toward the Indo-Pacific, including Germany and the Netherlands in 2020. France, Germany, and the Netherlands were also the main drivers of the process that led to the fast adoption of the EU Indo-Pacific strategy in 2021.

In many ways, the overarching shifts in Asian regionalism described in previous sections, including the shift away from an economic to a security focus (shift 1), create obstacles to Europe’s traditional engagement with Asia. The EU is a major trading power. Hence, it has a strong focus on economic issues and opportunities in the region. China is today the most important trading partner of the EU and its leading economy, Germany. However, with ongoing geopolitical shifts, new vulnerabilities are emerging in Europe, and a growing consciousness exists that economic prosperity depends on political developments in Asia. This awareness was reinforced during the COVID-19 pandemic in
2020 and 2021. Examples of this include the risk of disruptions in trade and supply chains or negative impacts resulting from excessive economic or technological dependence – all of which are also components and consequences of intensifying US-China strategic competition.

In Asia, ASEAN, which epitomizes bottom-up multilateral Asian regionalism, has been the EU’s key regional partner and will remain a central reference point for its future engagement in the region (ASEAN centrality). EU-ASEAN relations were upgraded to a strategic partnership in December 2020 during a meeting of foreign ministers between the two unions. However, with their engagement under the Indo-Pacific framework, European actors also recognize that a narrow focus on established ASEAN-centered institutions may not sufficiently acknowledge the changing geopolitical landscape in the region, including India’s increased role beyond the South Asian region. The challenge consists of finding new ways of engagement that can accommodate the still evolving and unconsolidated nature of Indo-Pacific regionalism, as well as its potentially divisive effects.

From a broader European perspective, the turning points that allowed for a more active engagement with the Indo-Pacific concept came in 2019 and 2020.43 Previously, strictly exclusionary interpretations of the Indo-Pacific (shift 4) curtailed early European actors also recognize that a narrow focus on established ASEAN-centered institutions may not sufficiently acknowledge the changing geopolitical landscape in the region, including India’s increased role beyond the South Asian region. The challenge consists of finding new ways of engagement that can accommodate the still evolving and unconsolidated nature of Indo-Pacific regionalism, as well as its potentially divisive effects.

From a broader European perspective, the turning points that allowed for a more active engagement with the Indo-Pacific concept came in 2019 and 2020.43 Previously, strictly exclusionary interpretations of the Indo-Pacific (shift 4) curtailed early European
enthusiasm for embracing the concept. A majority of Chinese analysts still see the Indo-Pacific framework as something that seriously harms Chinese interests, with only a minority believing that China should participate in it.\textsuperscript{44} In June 2019, ASEAN adopted its Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, which promotes an open, inclusive model of the region. Through a reference to this paper, China officially acknowledged the Indo-Pacific concept for the first time in November 2021.\textsuperscript{45} For Germany and the Netherlands, and later the EU, the ASEAN Outlook was instrumental in that it demonstrated how to engage with the Indo-Pacific framework without adopting a politicized or confrontational approach.\textsuperscript{46} The EU Indo-Pacific strategy is explicit in that it is “inclusive of all partners in the region.”\textsuperscript{47} However, new complications and challenges are being created for the EU’s inclusive approach by subsequent and more emphatic examples of US-led pushback against China’s assertive behavior, including the formation of AUKUS.

Importantly, the shifts described here also create new opportunities for European actors. The rise in minilateral cooperative arrangements in the region offers new entry points for engagement in Asia in terms of partnerships and issue areas. Such arrangements are potentially more open to the inclusion of Europeans than previous arrangements built around the bilateral US alliance system or ASEAN multilateralism, which are typically reserved for Asia-Pacific states.\textsuperscript{48} Most minilateral mechanisms as they emerge in the Indo-Pacific are focused on non-traditional security issues. According to its strategy, the EU intends to strengthen cooperation in priority areas, such as human security, including pandemic preparedness; ocean governance, which covers the fight against illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing; and cyber security. The EU has also shown an openness in enhancing issue-specific cooperation with minilateral groupings, such as with the Quad in the areas of climate change, technology and vaccines. However, the EU also wants to deepen bilateral partnerships in the region.\textsuperscript{49}

Particularly in the economic and regulatory domains, intensifying geopolitical competition may open a door for stronger European engagement in Asia. The EU and its member states are leading direct investors and development cooperation partners both in Asia and globally. Building on this role, the EU will seek to step up its connectivity activities, which it outlined in its EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy of 2018 and reaffirmed in its Global Gateway strategy of 2021.\textsuperscript{50} Like the United States and Japan, the
EU sees infrastructure development financing, including in digitalization, technology, and climate change, as a key area for supporting states in the region in light of China’s fast-growing regional influence. The EU will also continue and reinforce its promotion of free trade with Asia, an area in which the United States is facing growing constraints due to domestic opposition. Indeed, over the past decade, the EU has concluded bilateral trade agreements with South Korea, Japan, Singapore, and Vietnam. It has also started negotiations with several other countries in the region.

For an EU-wide approach toward the Indo-Pacific to be sustainable and impactful, it will have to successfully operationalize and implement its strategies and concepts. This will also require the EU to streamline activities, including the use of existing dialogues and platforms. Indeed, experience shows that strategies concerning the Indo-Pacific framework do not always align with real actions taken. France, having been at the forefront of promoting engagement with the framework, has set ambitious goals for its six-month presidency of the Council of the European Union, which continues until the end of June 2022. Together with the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, France jointly hosted a ministerial forum in February 2022. At this forum, EU member states, the European Commission, and around 30 Indo-Pacific partner countries, including India, Indonesia, and Japan, addressed the implementation of the EU Indo-Pacific Strategy and the Global Gateway initiative. When discussing potential areas for strengthening European cooperation and concrete projects for implementation, the participants highlighted areas such as coordinated maritime presence and vaccine cooperation.51

In the pursuit of their Indo-Pacific policies, European actors will need to balance their own interests and resources – which are affected by other pressing policy issues in their neighborhood – with the expectations and demands of all regional partners, for which they want to be credible and responsible partners. Regional views differ on the desirable extent and nature of European engagement, such as on how strongly Europeans should promote multilateralism in the region. Another major challenge involves coordination among European states, given their varying capabilities, interests, and vulnerabilities. As a state with a presence in the region that is focusing on maritime security challenges, France has positioned itself more clearly within US-China strategic competition and has sought closer ties with Australia, India, and
Japan. For example, the French navy recently participated in joint naval exercises with Quad states. Germany is pursuing a broader approach, something which is reflective of a position shared by many other European countries. Nevertheless, the proactive positioning by some European governments has not yet resulted in broader policy debates or increased interest in the topic among voters.⁵²

A Region in Flux

Asia’s geopolitical landscape is undergoing fast and fundamental changes, and the global heavyweights China and the United States are competing over leadership and influence in the region. As a result, the positioning of actors in and toward Asia is highly dynamic. States and organizations are rapidly issuing new strategies on Asia in which they are defining and redefining their interests and launching new initiatives and cooperation formats. The emergence of the Indo-Pacific as a frame of reference needs to be understood in this highly dynamic context. The goal of this chapter has been to analyze the strategic implications of the emerging framework by highlighting the shifts that are occurring as it slowly supplants the previously dominant construct of the Asia-Pacific. The framework is bringing about a form of regionalism that is security- rather than economy-driven, top-down rather than bottom-up, minilateral- rather than multilateral-oriented, and exclusionary rather than inclusive. With these shifts arise new opportunities and challenges for regional and extra-regional actors.

Analysts today agree that the Indo-Pacific framework is here to stay and that it is likely to gain relevance. This is due to China’s rise and the perception held by the concept’s proponents that it is an effective and adjustable policy framework. Like all regional projects, the Indo-Pacific is based on “mental maps” that reflect actors’ politically and ideologically anchored visions for the region. In contrast to the idea of the Asia-Pacific, the Indo-Pacific concept has the strength of being able to reflect new strategic realities, including India’s rising political and economic relevance for the region. The Indo-Pacific concept also acknowledges the increased interconnectedness between the Indian Ocean and the Asia-Pacific – a reality also mirrored by the China-led BRI.

At the same time, the framework will continue to suffer from an inherent fragility, which is related to its lack of broader integrative power and unanswered questions concerning leadership and legitimacy. Even the main advocates of the concept differ in their views about what constitutes the region and what their priorities
should be. Actors such as ASEAN and India promote inclusiveness and transparency as features of Indo-Pacific regionalism. Japan has also reformulated its approach so that it is less focused on competition than before. This was prompted by Southeast Asian and Chinese reactions to Japan’s initial perception of the concept. However, US-led activities related to the Indo-Pacific have generally had a confrontational, zero-sum character, even if the US 2022 Indo-Pacific strategy document also suggests a shift toward a more differentiated view. Other Asian states fear that the concept increases competition and makes decision-making practices increasingly opaque. They are thus concerned that it will undermine the region’s compromise-seeking efforts and, eventually, peace and stability.

For its institutionalization, the Indo-Pacific framework will depend on the active support of its main advocates, Australia, India, Japan, and the United States. The extent and breadth of cooperation within the framework will be determined by the success of the cooperation formats these states establish with other regional and extra-regional states. These formats include those in the area of security, such as the Quad (Plus), and beyond. To gain more widespread acceptance, including among small- and medium-sized Asian states, the proponents of the Indo-Pacific will have to address concerns regarding the potentially polarizing effect of the concept. However, as a reactive, developing concept, China’s behavior and positioning will also be decisive in the coming years. For instance, India’s interest in deepening ties with Australia, Japan, and the United States will increase with the threat posed by China, both on land and at sea.

Asian states, especially the relatively large and regionally ambitious ones, have started to rely on minilateral cooperation formats. This has come about through their search for a well-functioning and responsive institutional architecture that can address the multiple and potentially destabilizing challenges facing their region according to their interests and priorities. Indeed, the growing array of traditional and non-traditional security threats has exposed the limits of existing bilateral alliances and multilateral institutions. Most likely, the future architecture in Asia will consist of a mix of increasingly less important Asia-Pacific multilateral institutions; Indo-Pacific minilaterals such as the Quad; traditional bilateral military alliances that constitute the US hub-and-spoke system; and Chinese initiatives, which include, among others, the BRI, the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and the
Finally, in the development of the Indo-Pacific concept in recent years, there has often been a gap between ambitions and ideas about the concept and real actions taken. In practice, any concrete action taken within the Indo-Pacific framework runs the risk of supporting a US position in the broader geopolitical competition with China. An example of this is provided by the 2021–2022 mission of a German warship. It aimed to highlight a shared concern among Indo-Pacific proponents, the importance of safeguarding the rules-based international order. However, the warship’s route took it to the US base at Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean, which is contested under international law. Inconsistencies between rhetoric and actions will undermine Europe’s credibility and its normative power – prerequisites for shaping the development of the Indo-Pacific.

Asian states’ security relations are complex, and their interests are varied. In this setting, Europeans face the challenge of finding their own voice. The shifts that accompany the adoption of the Indo-Pacific framework create obstacles for European engagement with the region. This is because these shifts contrast with the EU’s main strength as a trading partner and its institutional functioning as an inclusive multilateral institution. Given that it has few competencies when it comes to hard security questions, the EU can hardly be expected to play a meaningful traditional security role in the Indo-Pacific. At the same time, its economic engagement with the region is strong and set to increase. Its normative strength, the clout of its internal market, and its related regulatory powers enable the EU to exert its influence in the region in cooperation with Asian states. These attributes provide the EU with the ability to engage through well-established and new instruments, such as free trade promotion and infrastructure financing.

RCEP. The elements that form this mix may end up both complementing and competing with each other. As the complexity of the regional architecture grows, there is a risk that it will become an even greater challenge to establish effective coordination and consensus-building.

4 Wang Yi, Foreign Minister Wang Yi Meets the Press, Beijing, 08.03.2018.


8 Donald Trump, Remarks by President Trump at APEC CEO Summit, Da Nang, 11.11.2017.


12 Ibid, 6.


15 Wilson, “Rescaling to the Indo-Pacific,” 181.


18 See He / Feng, The Institutionalization of the Indo-Pacific, for the “leadership-institution” model.

19 Ibid, 149–168.

20 Ibid, 162.

21 Ibid, 163.

22 Ibid, 164.

23 Ibid, 162.

24 Ibid, 164.

25 We thank Bec Strating, Director of La Trobe Asia, for her valuable insights into the Australian Indo-Pacific debate.


46 Okano-Heijmans, Towards Meaningful Action.


48 Atanassova-Cornelis/Pejsova, Minilateralism, 1.


52 For a cross-country comparison, see Garima Mohan, “A European Approach to the Indo-Pacific?” Global Public Policy Institute, 2019.

