

Making Sense of the Indo-Pacific Strategy: An Inheritance from the Past

By Takuya Matsuda

The term “Indo-Pacific” has gained wider currency as the Trump administration promotes the Indo-Pacific Strategy as its flagship policy towards the region. Since the substance of this strategy has yet to be made clear, one could easily make speculations that the Indo-Pacific Strategy is a “containment policy” towards China given the emphasis the new National Defense Strategy has given to great power competition.

Takuya Matsuda, PhD Candidate at King's College in London, explains that "Indo-Pacific" is a concept that emerged as a culmination of policy choices made since the mid-1990s to incorporate India into the US strategic framework in the Western Pacific and to encourage allies including Japan to upgrade their roles in international security."

However, a brief overview of this concept may offer a different narrative. It is worth highlighting here that this increasingly popularized term is nothing new. “Indo-Pacific” is a concept that emerged as a culmination of policy choices made since the mid-1990s to incorporate India into the US strategic framework in the Western Pacific and to encourage allies including Japan to upgrade their roles in international security. In other words, this concept, which originated in the mid-1990s, gained momentum in the 2000s, before Chinese maritime expansion started to challenge American primacy in the Western Pacific.

The strong defense relationship that Washington and Delhi enjoy today would not be possible without policy choices made by the Clinton and Bush administrations. The US tilt to India during the Kargil Crisis in 1999 is often cited as the first indicator of America’s interest in strengthening ties with India. The civilian nuclear deal negotiated and signed in the mid-2000s was also consequential in forging closer ties between the two nations by setting aside one of the contentious issues that complicated the relationship. These policy choices made in the 2000s were crucial in realizing the “Strategic Handshake” between the two nations with India’s “Act East” and the US “Rebalance” to Asia, which have made strong defense ties between the two nations increasingly visible since the Obama administration.

On the other hand, Japan’s resurgence as a proactive player in international security has occasionally been portrayed as a balancing strategy against China, often attributed to the leadership of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. Balancing behavior is a relevant factor in explaining Japan’s security policy; however, it is also worth highlighting here that the origin of Japan’s proactive security policy can be found in the mid-1990s, before Chinese maritime expansion started to become a major concern for Japan’s national security. Tokyo’s embrace of a proactive security policy stems from its pursuit of international security in the post-Cold War era corresponding to Washington’s strategy. The initial motivation for Japan to reconsider its pacifist security policy was the criticism received for its “checkbook diplomacy” in the first Gulf War, which prompted Japan

to seriously consider ways to contribute to international security in a more concrete manner, such as in Peace Keeping Operations (PKO). Chinese maritime expansion along with the looming challenge posed by North Korea also have certainly played a certain role in dictating Japanese security policy. However, it is noteworthy that the main motivation behind the Japanese reexamination of strategy has been to become a constructive contributor to international peace and stability.

The concept “Indo-Pacific” highlights a strategic framework, where these Asiatic powers—Japan and India — enhance their collaboration in the maritime domain. In fact, the term “Indo-Pacific” was first unveiled by Mr. Abe in front of Indian members of parliament in 2007 in a speech entitled as “Confluence of the Two Seas”. As he discussed the maritime connections between the Pacific and Indian Oceans, he used the expression “broader Asia (kakudai Asia)” as he encouraged India to be part of the Asian security framework. Mr. Abe has developed this idea into what he called “Asia’s Democratic Security Diamond”, which advocated for stronger ties among the US, Japan, India, and Australia. These concepts have now evolved into the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy”, which was announced by Mr. Abe at the sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD) meeting held in Nairobi in August 2016.

Thus, the concept behind the Indo-Pacific strategy demonstrates the constant effort policy-makers in Washington have made in maintaining a robust US presence in the region. In other words, the Indo-Pacific strategy is an inheritance from past US administrations along with ideas produced by allies and like-minded nations in the post-Cold War era.

The current strategic environment tempts one to label this strategy as a containment policy against China. However, the intentions that shaped this concept in the past quarter century deserve some attention in making sense of this concept. The idea of Indo-Pacific emerged as Washington, Tokyo, and Delhi sought their role in preserving the status-quo in the post-Cold War era. The maritime nature of this concept, which is underscored by the fact that it involves the three participants of the Malabar Exercise, an annual trilateral naval exercise, illuminates this point.

Moreover, this concept underlines the evolving nature of America’s alliance network in the region. Moving beyond a bilateral-based system that put constraints on allies, this concept illustrates how a multilateral security network is emerging out of the existing hub-and-spokes system. This maritime-based security network based on the Indo-Pacific concept underscores a status-quo preservation mechanism instead of a mere balancing coalition, where US allies and defense partners play a major part in fulfilling that role.

The increasingly hybrid strategic environment in the South China Sea, for instance, indicates new challenges that the Indo-Pacific strategy will need to address. Nevertheless, as the Trump administration considers ways to add substance to their regional flagship policy, it is helpful to bear in mind that this is an inheritance from past administrations with an origin that could be traced to a period before Chinese maritime expansion started to challenge American primacy. A brief look at the evolution of this concept reveals a nuanced picture of how this seemingly new concept has developed as a means to preserve the status-quo in the Indo-Pacific, through enhanced maritime awareness in the post-Cold War era.

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