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Book Review

Contest for the Indo-Pacific: Why China Won't Map the Future

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Rory Medcalf, *Contest for the Indo-Pacific: Why China Won't Map the Future*. La Trobe University Press, Paperback ISBN: 9781760641573, eISBN: 9781743821046 Pp. 324

As a new competition for power heats up between a rising China and the USA, the Indo-Pacific terminology has rapidly established itself in strategic parlance over the past few years. Rory Medcalf, in his book, takes a look at the history of the term, its origins, strategic competition, the rise of China and middle powers in the region, and much more. He looks at the importance of the name change from the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific and argues about why such a change is needed. He looks at the countries in the region, their interactions with their geography, history, and indeed, with each other. His book is full of references to the rise of countries in this region, and the equally significant risk of conflict that comes with it.

The first chapter starts with an anecdote. It begins with what looks like the introduction of a classic bar joke: The Prime Ministers of Japan and India take a train ride. However, as Medcalf points out, the context behind this train ride is anything but comic. The 2016 visit to Japan (where the train ride takes place), Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India produced the first significant use of the

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term Indo-Pacific by India. It was already in use in Australia and Japan, and following this, other nations like the USA also slowly began using the term. The key reason behind this was China.

Medcalf keenly observes that while China is poised to overtake the USA on several fronts, the powers of the Indo-Pacific together are far greater than China in terms of GDP, population, and military strength. He also observes that America now views China as a long term threat. The Indo-Pacific became popular because America championed it. However, America was the follower, not the leader. The term was coined and popularized in Asia and America adopted what was already there. Thus, the term is not artificially planted on the region by America.

Medcalf argues that though the Indo-Pacific may seem jarring at first (just oceans without any continent unlike in the Asia-Pacific), a semi-artificial construct like the Indo-Pacific is the need of the hour. He states that it is a response to China's widening horizons. For defining the Indo-Pacific, he employs the same strategy used by Robert Kaplan, in his book *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power*(Kaplan 2011) by employing cartography and history first. This allows him to give an accurate outline of the region he wishes to describe. He traces the origins and usages of the term 'Indo-Pacific' from 14th Century Korean Maps to the 19th century German thinker Karl Haushofer. Haushofer was one of the first to use the term in a geopolitical sense.

But to take it back further, the term itself is sitting on thousands of years of trade and cultural links between the two Oceans. He argues against the Chinese whitewashing of history, especially of its benign centrality to world trade. He states that while China was one of the major focal points of the ancient Silk Route, the true centre was ancient India. Much like George Coedes highlighted decades ago in his book, *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*,(Coedès 1968), Medcalf highlights the extensive cross-cultural impact of India and later, China on the Indo-Pacific region. The vast Indo-Pacific trade network was only disrupted with the collapse of colonial empires following the World War II (European colonial empires had however rearranged it somewhat). He notes

that the recent emergence of India and China is now reintegrating the region and ending that disruption.

Medcalf also takes a look at how the Indo-Pacific term emerged. He begins by looking at China's baby steps into the Indian Ocean to fight Somali Piracy in 2008. The Global Financial Crisis, weakened America, and the 2008 Olympics had emboldened China. At around the same time, tensions begin to emerge in the South and East China Seas. This period marks the beginning of the end of the USA's policy of engaging China (with hopes of making it a responsible stakeholder). This part thus looks at the use of naval power projection. He traces the beginnings of the Indo-Pacific with Japanese Prime Minister Abe's Security Diamond and US President Obama's Asia-Pacific Pivot. America, India, Australia, and Japan had begun to deepen cooperation. At the same time, China was becoming more aggressive and assertive.

According to Medcalf, unlike the 19th Century "Great Game" between Imperial Russia and the British Empire, there are more than two powers in the region besides the USA and China. Though the focus is more on China, Medcalf scrutinises the major powers in the Indo-Pacific namely China, India, and the United States. He describes each of them, how they see themselves, risks, and development. On China, Medcalf stated that the Maritime Silk Road of China's flagship Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is essentially the Indo-Pacific with Chinese characteristics. The BRI and the Indo-Pacific are equally amorphous and the BRI is loaded with Chinese interests. He also notes the other players in the Indo-Pacific (like Russia, UK, France, Indonesia, etc.) who also have their own issues with China.

Medcalf focuses on the battle for narratives covering China's efforts to promote its Belt and Road Initiative and improve its image globally. He also talks about China's attempts to manipulate history to suit its narratives. Besides from traditional "soft power" initiatives in other countries, Medcalf highlights China's "sharp power" operations (like political interference and influence buying) in other countries. He also talks about interference from countries like Russia and China in Universities, elections, research institutes,

etc. and characterises this as a battle for the perception of the entire society of a country rather than an elite group.

Another topic Medcalf covers is geo-economics, especially on the importance of the Indian Ocean trade routes for all major economies in the Indo-Pacific. He points to how the region is under the thrall of competing forces of decoupling and increasing connectivity. While the status of decoupling, reshoring, or some form of uneasy status quo is described as uncertain, the region is increasingly interlinked by physical infrastructure and technology (like 5G).

Medcalf, however, points out that unlike the much-hyped dreams of economic interdependence and globalisation, the reality today is a state of geo-economic power-play. He points to the connectivity projects under the Belt and Road as an example and warns that colonial powers of old have shown that the flag often follows trade. He marks India's refusal to attend the Belt and Road Forum hosted by China in 2017 as a turning point. After that incident, many nations became willing to openly raise objections about the BRI.

Medcalf's most concerning point was about the increased quest for naval power in the region. He points to China's aims to focus on its navy, gain complete control over its near shores, and project power abroad. The re-emergence of China as a major power in the Indian Ocean for the first time since the 14th century from 2009 onwards is a part of this. The book details China's efforts to establish bases abroad as well as the new naval and nuclear arms race that has gripped the region.

Medcalf also touches upon diplomacy, where he notes the rise of "minilateralism" which refers to groupings of three or more countries. These are flexible alliances which exemplify the idea that there is safety in numbers (bilateral arrangements meanwhile, generally favour the strong). However, he notes that the effectiveness of these groupings is still very much up for debate.

In the final chapter of the book, Medcalf takes the risk of predicting the future, or rather, highlights the risks. He sketches various scenarios for the future, ranging from cooperation or competition between the powers in the Indo-Pacific. He points out that

currently, the risk for conflict remains high. Medcalf warns against “horizontal escalation” where if a country is losing on one front, it opens other, wider fronts. Due to new technology, the battlefronts will be complex and thus, results will be hard to predict in the event of any conflict.

Notably, Medcalf states that China has staked its domestic reputation on international success and therefore stands exposed to greater risk from failure. Chinese president Xi Jinping has made big mistakes before and Medcalf believes that China will make more in the future. This observation seems almost prophetic in light of the blunders that China made during the Coronavirus Pandemic (Medcalf writes the last part of his book in late 2019). He highlights the pitfalls of America pushing too hard against China. He also looks at the efforts of others like Japan who wield considerable soft power to counter China’s narratives.

Medcalf compares the situation of unease and distrust in the Indo-Pacific to the Cuban Missile Crisis. He warns that the nations in the Indo-Pacific region need to learn to coexist to avoid conflict and he advocates for types of “incorporation” and “conditional engagement”. He states that notions like containment, accommodation, or spheres of influence will not work as it is impossible to enforce. China needs to be recognised as a great power and given respect. However, China in turn needs to respect and accommodate other nations in the region. The Indo-Pacific is about diluting China’s dominance in the region, but not for shutting it out. It is rather, for realising a multipolar future. Medcalf ends on the note that the realities and complexities of the Indo-Pacific mean that in no way is China’s victory a foregone conclusion.

Medcalf has penned a very absorbing and thought provoking book. The depth and breadth of Medcalf’s research are on full display in this book, as is the eloquence of his writing. In many ways, the book is a continuation of Robert Kaplan’s *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power* (Kaplan 2011), written a little less than a decade ago. Kaplan had back then pointed to the Indian Ocean as a new area of competition and interest (for America). Medcalf, with the Indo-Pacific, has made much of the same

arguments, but with a wider mandate. But if a drawback has to be pointed out, it can be said that there is little that is new in terms of information. There are no exposés, declassified documents, interviews with people in (or formerly in) power, or anything else of that nature.

As an Australian, Medcalf does write with a viewpoint from that country. However, the book in no way restricts itself to Australia. It gives extensive coverage to the important countries and organisations of the Indo-Pacific. There is a notable exception to this in the form of China. It is a country which is at the heart of the Indo-Pacific and forms a pervasive subtext throughout the book (along with perhaps India). While the book can be read as an anti-China work, it at the end of the day, is not advocating for conflict. It states the facts, lays out the groundwork, and lets the readers reach a conclusion of their choice. That feature, which is increasingly rare in the ever divided field of International Relations, is perhaps the defining trait of a good book in this field.

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