

THE
**CENTRE
OF GRAVITY**
SERIES

**PIVOTING THE MAP:
AUSTRALIA'S
INDO-PACIFIC SYSTEM**

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The title of this new series is not unassuming, being nothing less than the *Centre of Gravity*. So it is daunting, as well as a privilege, to be asked to contribute the first paper. This series promises to open a valuable new chapter in the history of the Australian National University and the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, in contributing depth, reflection and new ideas to Australia's strategic policy debate. Therefore I should confess that the geopolitical frame of reference I am about to present is not exactly novel.

In fact, the Indo-Pacific intriguingly had a burst of life at this very university a little under 50 years ago, at a very different time of strategic flux. It was an age when a British sphere of influence in the Indian Ocean and an Australian atomic bomb still seemed plausible near-term security futures. In 1964 and 1965, two seminars were held at this university by the so-called Defence Studies Project, bringing together academics and policy practitioners to examine, respectively, the risks of 'nuclear dispersal' or the spread of nuclear weapons 'in Asia and the Indo-Pacific region' and 'Commonwealth responsibilities for security in the Indo-Pacific region'.¹

Even then, it was at least to some degree about China. A catalyst was the Chinese nuclear test of 1964. Today these proceedings make fascinating reading, and tell us at least three things. Serious-sounding prognostications about strategic futures can look far off the mark with hindsight. Second, in those not-so-distant days Australia's scholars, soldiers and diplomats alike seemed able to default to plain and elegant English; they were mercifully ignorant of words like workshop, 1.5 track and proliferation. The third lesson is that the idea of the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean as separate strategic systems has had an even shorter, more contested life than has been realised by many of us accustomed to Australia's late 20th century East Asian foreign policy outlook.

“The recent reawakening of the Indo-Pacific reflects three wider realities.”

But, let us return to our own strategic uncertainty. Certainly the Indo-Pacific has gained considerable currency of late. Its acceptance as a distinct biogeographic region in marine science is of long standing. But in geopolitics, the term lay dormant for decades, until its recent re-emergence in a gathering tempo of speeches, press reports, government documents and think-tank reports. I'll confess to my own small contributions to this over the past five years, having previously seen it deployed in an internal Australian government think piece around 2005, the same year the Singapore-based Australian journalist and analyst Michael Richardson presciently wrote that the nascent East Asia Summit could be the emerging capstone for an Indo-Pacific order.² A broadly-agreed definition is a work in progress, but let's begin with this: "an emerging Asian strategic system that encompasses both the Pacific and Indian Oceans, defined in part by the geographically expanding interests and reach of China and India, and the continued strategic role and presence of the United States in both."³

Last year, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton described the Australia-US alliance as an Indo-Pacific one, in an article foreshadowing America's Asian pivot strategy.⁴ Most recently, a week ago, elements of the AUSMIN dialogue and communique in Perth had an Indo-Pacific flavour.⁵ And for those of us who have promoted the Indo-Pacific idea, its inclusion if not full endorsement in the Australian Government's recent Asian Century White Paper was welcome.⁶ Here at last is a definition of Asia that automatically includes Australia and could help resolve our long debate about national identity.

Turning to Australia's strategic and foreign policy discourse, I would contend that the recent reawakening of the Indo-Pacific reflects three wider realities.

For Australians, the most immediate is our distinct two-ocean geography and the extension of our interests this entails if we are serious about engaging our full region in this so-called Asian Century. The Asia that Australia needs to engage, economically, societally and strategically, is no longer limited to the Southeast Asia, Japan, and Korea of the 1970s, 80s and 90s, or the China of the 90s and early 2000s; it is also South Asia but especially India, now a major trading partner, substantial investor, growing military power and diplomatic player, the source of one of our largest skilled migrant communities, and a major relationship with vast potential for further growth – as well as a nation with problems we cannot ignore. Again, the Indo-Pacific framework for Australia's interests is hardly new. Indeed, long before 1964, from 1788 right up until the Second World War, there was no question that the maritime Asian region that mattered to Australia economically and strategically was what we might now call the Indo-Pacific. One more foray into our past is illuminating.

In 1845, the soldier, surveyor and explorer Thomas Mitchell left Sydney on an expedition to find and map an overland route across Australia to the head of the Gulf of Carpentaria. At the end of his epic journey he proposed naming the north of this continent Australindia. After all, a major reason for his mission was, in his words, "that a way should be opened to the shores of the Indian Ocean" – and thus the sea

lines of communication from northern Australia to Singapore, India and England. New South Wales had established an important trade with India, exporting cavalry remounts. But the hazardous navigation of Torres Strait was a problem. More generally, there was also a wish in the isolated and then-struggling colony to find a way to take economic advantage of northern Australia's relative closeness to India, China and the "Indian archipelago" or Indonesia. Perhaps some far-sighted colonists were anticipating what our Asian Century white paper now calls the "prospects of proximity".

Now the title of this paper has promised to pivot the map of Asia, and with Mitchell's help we can do so. Mitchell's diagonally-tilted map, from his 1848 book *Tropical Australia*, provides what is for us a refreshing perspective on the Asia that matters to Australia this century.⁷ China, Southeast Asia and India are all equally conspicuous. Our attention is focused on sea lanes leading to major populations and markets. It may not quite reach to Hormuz or Honolulu, but it's as telling a map of the core Indo-Pacific as you will find. And with the prominence it gives to the coasts of what are now Western Australia and the Northern Territory, it is a map that would usefully grace the office walls of energy corporates in Perth and defence planners in Canberra or indeed Washington.

Which brings us to the alliance. Our American ally's relatively new strategy of re-emphasising its diplomatic attention and military commitment to Asia is very clearly a pivot into the Indo-Pacific -- the Indian Ocean and Western Pacific -- rather than more narrowly to East Asia or the Asia-Pacific. Our geography, qualities as a nation and status as an ally together mean that Australia plays a serious part in this changing orientation. Militarily, Washington no doubt recognises the importance of the Indian Ocean, not solely as a commons to protect, or as the globe's busiest and most strategically significant trade corridor (carrying two-thirds of world oil shipments and a third of the world's bulk cargo),⁸ or as the maritime backyard of growing strategic partner India, but also a region of simultaneously increasing interest and vulnerability for China.

And this leads us to the third major reason for the relevance of the Indo-Pacific concept to Australian policymakers, and the key analytical point I want to make here. In both an economic and a strategic sense, the Indo-Pacific is a valid and objective description of the greater regional system in which Australia now finds itself. This is in large part related to the rise of China and India, the world's first mega-states, and the expansion of their economic interests and their strategic and diplomatic imperatives into what each might once have considered its primary maritime zone of interest.⁹ Given that China, India and Japan -- as well as other nations in Asia -- are becoming so acutely dependent on energy imports across the ocean from the Middle East and Africa, and given that Australia in turn relies so heavily on seaborne commerce with those powers, what other simple formulation so neatly describes the region?

The China-India strategic dimension of this is real and growing. China sees a growing strategic imperative to safeguard far-flung interests as best it can. So the flag will in some way follow trade -- that is, security in one form or another will follow the presence of large numbers of Chinese nationals and commercial interests. With the Gulf of Aden anti-piracy mission, four continuous years of rotating Chinese naval taskforces, and

with the use of PLA navy and air force assets to rescue Chinese nationals from Egypt and even Libya last year, this has already begun to happen. For its part, India perceives growing prospects of a diplomatic and potentially naval challenge from China to be occurring in 'its' Indian Ocean. New Delhi is also finding its mostly seaborne trade expanding rapidly with East Asia, much of which is with China. India is also establishing substantial security links with the United States and other Asia-Pacific nations, and playing itself permanently into nominally East Asian diplomatic institutions including the East Asia Summit.

So Australia is entering an Indo-Pacific age by dint of: 1) our geographically-defined interests and our economic-societal enmeshment with Asia, including India; 2) the rebalancing imperatives of the US alliance; 3) and, most importantly, the fact that the major states of Asia now have some fundamental economic and strategic drivers -- many involving the sea -- that compel them to look to each other's neighbourhoods, beyond the erstwhile barriers of Southeast Asia's straits and archipelagos.

Just because Asian governments are not all, or not yet, comfortable with the Indo-Pacific label, does not mean that their interests and actual policy choices are not in accord with it. India, Japan, Singapore and Indonesia seem broadly at ease with rediscovering an Indo-Pacific destiny.

China, on the other hand, has some understandable misgivings about the Indo-Pacific concept or at least the nomenclature, even though ultimately it need not.

“The Indo-Pacific is a valid and objective description of the greater regional system in which Australia now finds itself.”

Certainly there have been some reasonable criticisms of the Indo-Pacific concept, and in concluding I want to briefly address the chief ones among those.

Just as some of the champions of Indo-Pacific terminology are Australians – and with their ranks including incoming Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade Secretary Peter Varghese, Defence Minister Stephen Smith, Michael Richardson, Michael Wesley and Greg Sheridan – so too are Australian scholars leading a counter current of healthy critique. Among others, Dennis Rumley et al have sought to scrutinise the supposed biases and implications of this construct, Nick Bisley and Andrew Phillips have asked what it actually means, and Richard Rigby and Brendan Taylor have done a service for the present paper by cataloguing the criticisms.¹⁰

One claim is that the very act of talking up the Indo-Pacific nature of Australia's geography and interests unduly raises America's expectations of what Australia can deliver as an ally. I am not sure I buy this. Either the US strategic policy establishment assesses that it can secure value from Australia as an ally or it does not, based on its own appraisals of Australia's characteristics, including capabilities, political will, public opinion, and, yes, geography and geopolitical orientation. Whether or not we openly define our interests as Indo-Pacific or Asia-Pacific – and the public language of AUSMIN still refers principally to the Asia-Pacific – those assessments will be broadly the same.

The second criticism is that Asia's hottest near-term security challenges are sub-regional. The nuclear and wider tensions on the Korean Peninsula are essentially a North Asian problem, as are China-Japan tensions in the East China Sea, not to mention China-Taiwan. Likewise, the risk of confrontation between India-Pakistan is largely viewed as a South Asian problem.

Of course, no simple theory or single strategic system captures all contingencies, and the Indo-Pacific construct can to a considerable degree be reconciled with the existence of these important subregional tensions. We are talking of a multi-layered and complex Asian strategic order where subregional contests can exist alongside wider regional and global dynamics. And if Asia, Indo-Pacific, Asia-Pacific or otherwise, is indeed becoming the global centre of gravity, then any conflict here involving a major power will have global impact.

Moreover, I am not sure the dynamics of subregional tensions are so geographically quarantined anymore, if ever they were. The United States and China will each in its own way be crucial to the shape and outcome of any future India-Pakistan confrontation, as they were in 1999 and 2002. Asia's most complex theatre of maritime security tensions, in the South China Sea, is not narrowly an East Asian problem – supposedly external players from the United States to Europe, India, the Middle East and Australia all have stakes in some of the world's busiest shipping lanes. Many countries see the South China Sea as a test case for how a powerful China could behave. Above all, the nations projected to be the weightiest global powers in this century – China, the United States and India – are the big Indo-Pacific three, and their security relations will shape or shake both regional and global order.

The final criticism I want to address is the most important – is the Indo-Pacific really in the end just a code for balancing against or excluding China? Let's assume that Washington and others are actively building embryonic balancing coalitions in light of uncertainties about future Chinese power. Assume also that the Indo-Pacific idea makes it more feasible to include India in such a coalition and to extend any prospective area of operations to the Indian Ocean. These are reasons why the Indo-Pacific concept might seem to suit America and India more than China. Yet against these points must be weighed the realities of growing interconnectedness of many nations' economic and strategic interests, especially China's and India's, across what we might call the Indo-Pacific. These linkages are undeniable and at the level of analysis the term Indo-Pacific is merely a way of describing them. True, an Indo-Pacific map of Asia is one in which Chinese influence is more diluted than in an exclusively East Asian setting. But, even according to China's own economic, energy and thus strategic interests, the Indo-Pacific also happens to be the wider regional context in which China is rising, a fact that cannot be wished away. Even if we assume that China's grand strategy and security 'ambitions' are unknown – even to its leaders – a map of its commercial interests, energy imports, and diplomatic attentions already makes China the quintessential Indo-Pacific power.

All of which leads to the crucial policy question: where, how and on what terms should China be included in an Indo-Pacific order and security arrangements within that order? China has legitimate and wide-ranging interests as a major Indo-Pacific power. Its wholesale exclusion from the regional order would be unsustainable, unjust and destabilising.

“No simple theory or single strategic system captures all contingencies.”

Yet we should not underestimate many other Indo-Pacific nations' anxieties about China and the great risks of instability accompanying movement in the direction of Chinese primacy. To try to lock China out of the Indian Ocean would be unsustainable folly. But China does not and should not possess a veto over the security dialogues or relationships other states may choose to develop.

Just as the Indo-Pacific strategic system is complex and multilayered, so too will be an effective diplomatic and strategic response to China's rise. A workable Indo-Pacific regional order should include great-power bilateralism alongside a growing role for inclusive regional institutions, with the East Asia Summit, ASEAN Regional Forum and ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting +8 reflecting an essentially Indo-Pacific footprint. In most circumstances it should not be beyond Australian defence diplomacy to maintain a strengthened Indo-Pacific alliance with the United States and partnerships with others including India, Indonesia and Japan alongside an improved security relationship with China. Australia is in every sense well positioned to take the initiative as a hub for selective, functional security multilateralism bringing together key powers of the Indo-Pacific. This would involve parallel tracks and instances of enhanced security dialogue, exercises and operational co-ordination with different combinations of countries, sometimes including China, and varying in function and levels of intensity. Much would depend on those nations' capabilities, interests, readiness to contribute and willingness to help shape and abide by rules and norms for regional and especially maritime security. That is where the map-making ends and the statecraft begins.

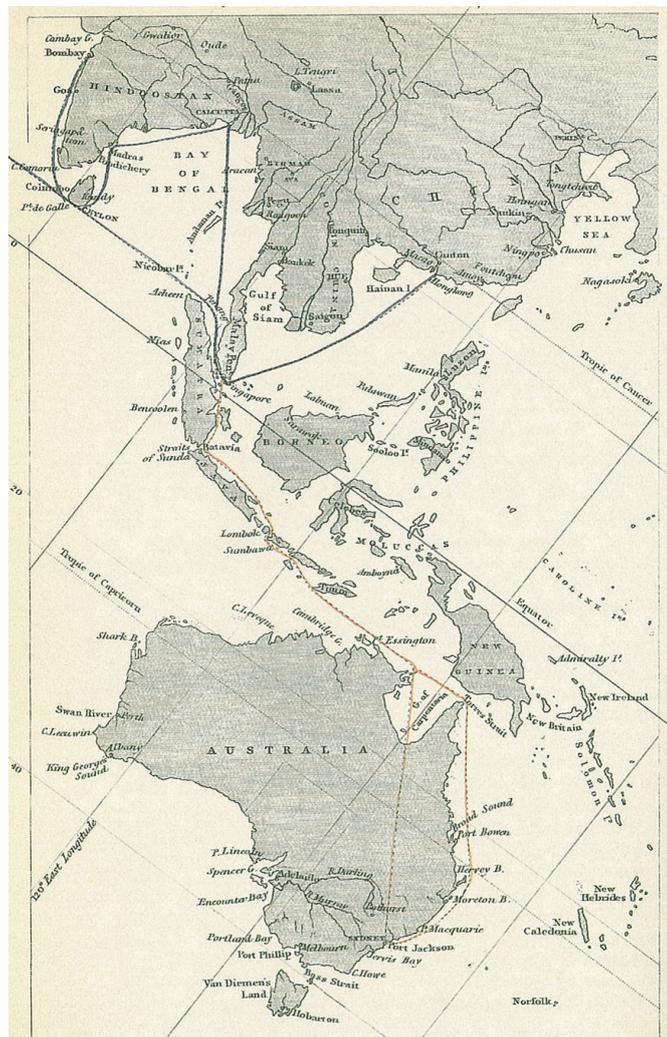


Figure 1: Map of the Indo-Pacific by Thomas Mitchell from his 1848 book *Tropical Australia*.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION

Australia's Indo-Pacific defence diplomacy should maintain a strengthened alliance with the United States and partnerships with others including India, Indonesia and Japan alongside an improved security relationship with China. Australia is in every sense well positioned to take the initiative as a hub for multilateral security diplomacy involving key Indo-Pacific powers the United States, China, India, Japan and Indonesia. This would involve parallel tracks and instances of enhanced security dialogue, exercises and operational co-ordination with different combinations of these and other countries, sometimes including China, and varying in function and levels of intensity. Much would depend on those nations' capabilities, interests, readiness to contribute and willingness to help shape and abide by rules and norms for regional and especially maritime security.

Footnotes

- 1 *Proceedings of the seminar on nuclear dispersal in Asia and the Indo-Pacific region*, 1965 Defence Studies Project, The Australian Institute of International Affairs and The Australian National University, Canberra; *Proceedings of the seminar on Commonwealth responsibilities for security in the Indo-Pacific region*, 1966 Defence Studies Project, The Australian Institute of International Affairs and The Australian National University, Canberra. The author is grateful for the assistance of Lowy Institute research associate Danielle Rajendram in finding these long-overlooked sources on Australia's defence debates.
- 2 Medcalf, Rory 2012, 'Indo-Pacific: What's in a name?', *The Interpreter*, 16 August [<http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2012/08/16/Indo-Pacific-Whate28099s-in-a-name.aspx>], last accessed 15 November 2012; Richardson, Michael 2005, 'Australia-Southeast Asia relations and the East Asian Summit', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 59, no. 3, p.364.
- 3 Medcalf, Rory, Heinrichs, Raoul & Jones, Justin, *Crisis and confidence: Major powers and maritime security in Indo-Pacific Asia*, p. 56 Lowy Institute for International Policy (Sydney, 2012). An obvious criticism is that this region is too big to be a 'strategic system', in which the security actions of one nation affect others. How can countries as distant as Chile and Mozambique be strategically meaningful parts of the same super region? I would agree they are not, except where they are embroiled in the dynamics of the three major powers. One way some analysts have usefully sought to add coherence is suggesting a 'core' Indo-Pacific centred on maritime Southeast Asia.
4. Clinton, Hillary 2011, 'America's Pacific century', *Foreign Policy*, November, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/10/11/americas_pacific_century], last accessed 15 November 2012.
5. Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs, 'Press Conference about the AUSMIN talks held in Perth', [http://foreignminister.gov.au/transcripts/2012/bc_tr_121114.html], last accessed 15 November 2012.
6. Commonwealth of Australia, 2012, *Australia in the Asian Century (White Paper)*, October 2012, p.74 [<http://asiancentury.dpmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/white-paper/australia-in-the-asian-century-white-paper.pdf>], last accessed 15 November 2012.
7. Mitchell, T L 1848, *Journal of an expedition into the interior of tropical Australia in search of a route from Sydney to the Gulf of Carpentaria*, Friends of the State Library of South Australia (Adelaide, 1999), originally Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans (London, 1848).
8. Commonwealth of Australia, 2012, *Australia in the Asian Century (White Paper)*, October 2012, p.74 [<http://asiancentury.dpmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/white-paper/australia-in-the-asian-century-white-paper.pdf>], last accessed 14 November 2012
9. See Mohan, C Raja 2012, *Samudra Manthan: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (Washington, DC, 2012)
10. For a broad discussion of Indo-Pacific concepts among Australian commentators, see Richardson, Michael 2005, 'Australia-Southeast Asia relations and the East Asian Summit', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 59, no. 3, pp. 351-365; Wesley, Michael 2011, *There Goes the Neighbourhood: Australia and the Rise of Asia*, New South Publishing (Sydney, 2011); Sheridan, Greg 2011, 'New Australia-US Push Deals India into the Pacific', *The Australian*, 17 September, [<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/opinion/columnists/new-australia-us-push-deals-india-in-to-pacific/story-e6frg76f-1226139302534>]; Medcalf, Rory, 'Indo-Pacific: What's in a name?', *The Interpreter*, 16 August 2012 [<http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2012/08/16/Indo-Pacific-Whate28099s-in-a-name.aspx>]; Rumley, Dennis, Doyle, Timothy & Chaturvedi, Sanjay 2012, 'Securing' the Indian Ocean? Competing regional security constructions', *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, vol. 8, no.1, pp.1-20; Bisley, Nick & Phillips, Andrew 2012, 'The Indo-Pacific: What does it actually mean?', *East Asia Forum*, 6 October 2012, [<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2012/10/06/the-indo-pacific-what-does-it-actually-mean/>]; Rigby, Richard & Taylor, Brendan 2012, 'The Indo-Pacific as a strategic system: An Australian perspective', paper presented at *USI National Security Seminar*, New Delhi, 1-2 November 2012 [unpublished].

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