



CHALLENGING THE CONCEPT OF THE REGION: THE INDO-PACIFIC AS AN EXAMPLE OF AN EMERGING “ARTIFICIAL” REGION¹

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Abstract

This article demonstrates that the social sciences and humanities have a variety of conceptual tools for deciding questions of regional nomenclature, but that existing theories of world regions do not easily account for the emergence of the Indo-Pacific as an organizing idea in world politics. Indeed, the Indo-Pacific would not be considered a likely candidate for “regionhood” from the perspective of the most prominent schools of thought within regional studies, for this study Old Regionalism, New Regionalism and Comparative Regionalism’s theoretical approaches testing in the case of Indo-Pacific. If the Indo-Pacific has a claim to regionhood, then, it is not because dispassionate observers have assessed that there is something empirical about this geographic space that warrants its categorization as a world region. Rather, the Indo-Pacific is a region only because a certain set of political actors have willed it into existence. In this sense, the Indo-Pacific is an artificial region – the product of political interests and manipulation. While all regions are artificial to a certain degree – that is, concepts are human-made by definition, and none are independent from the political world – the Indo-Pacific is perhaps more artificial than other world regions in the sense that the region would likely never have been conjured if not for political purposes. Thus, the Indo-Pacific construct is not just changing world politics – it is also altering the academic study of world politics in some important ways.

Keywords: Region, Regionalism, Indo-Pacific, Asia-Pacific, ASEAN.

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Introduction

The study of regions and regionalism is one of the most dynamic and multidisciplinary fields in the social sciences, drawing on scholarship from political science, International Relations, history, economics, and other domains. It is also a “revolutionary” field in the sense that the naming and conjuring of regional ideas can help to reorganize “political, economic, cultural, and social lives” (He, 2016: 1). Perhaps because of its revolutionary character, however, the study of regionalism suffers from a problem: the lack of common definitions, including even a common definition of regionalism as a field of study. Rather, the meaning of regionalism has changed over time, shifting according to the positionality of those defining it. In turn, this dissonance over the content and structure of regionalism leads to conceptual confusion over how real-world regions – regionalism’s supposed topics of study – should be demarcated.

As Kenneth Waltz (1979: 69) argued, a theory is required to explain behavioral patterns, not one-off changes. In broad terms, there are three schools of thought when it comes to the study of world regions: old regionalism, new regionalism, and comparative regionalism. Old regionalism is state-centric and state interest-oriented. Although it lost much of its dynamism in the early 1970s (Söderbaum, 2015: 10), the legacy of its rationalist approach continues to influence regionalism studies to a noticeable degree. By contrast, new regionalism and comparative regionalism, while broad schools, tend to draw more heavily on social constructivism as a shared theoretical approach. Accordingly, scholars in these traditions view regions not as given (immovable) objects, but as social constructs held together by historically contingent interactions, shared beliefs, identities, norms, and practices (Wendt, 1994; see also Wei, 2020).

What explains the rise of the Indo-Pacific? Is it a “natural” region, the product of fixed material realities and nation-states’ perceptions of these realities? Or is it a social construct, an idea that might not have arisen under different circumstances, and may yet prove vulnerable to a shifting political *zeitgeist*? In this article, I argue that the case of the Indo-Pacific demonstrates how increasingly complex interdependence and internationalization has generated new mechanisms for the construction of world regions. Today, states can create new regions according to their interests and security needs using a top-down approach, even when their security requirements and interests are not neatly convergent.

The Indo-Pacific is a newly emerging region. It did not exist during the Cold War or early post-Cold War period. However, it was created over the past 15 years or so by a group of actors including Japan, Australia, India, the United States, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). After witnessing the Indo-Pacific label being used in political discourse by leaders in these countries, international academia subsequently embraced the Indo-Pacific idea and began to define the region along various dimensions. For example, Australian scholar Rory Medcalf, one of the leading scholars of Indo-Pacific studies, uses the term as a region, especially in terms of cooperation and security, in his books and articles (please see Medcalf 2018; 2020). Some other scholars, for example, Troy Lee-Brown (2018), Sarah Teo and Bhubhindar Singh (2020), use Indo-Pacific as a minilateralism. Academia’s acceptance of the Indo-Pacific idea is puzzling, however, because the Indo-Pacific should not be considered a true world region according to most of the existing regionalism literature. This mismatch with prevailing ideas about regionalism means that the Indo-Pacific suffers from poor definition and under-theorization. Yet, of course, the Indo-Pacific has been afforded a place in scholarly literature and policy discourses, and so demands attention.

In this research, the development of the concept of Indo-Pacific will be evaluated in three schools of Regionalism Studies. With this methodology, the question of “if Indo-Pacific is a region according to scholarly literature” tries to answer. As Indo-Pacific is one of the newest regions, theory testing benefits both the case and the existing literature. It could be argued that Indo-Pacific is not a “region” according to the literature, although it has some features of “being a region” in all of the three schools, the Indo-Pacific is a region only because a certain set of political actors have willed it into existence. In this sense, the Indo-Pacific is an artificial region – the product of political interests and manipulation. While all regions are artificial to a certain degree – that is, concepts are human-made by definition, and none are independent from the political world – the Indo-Pacific is perhaps more artificial than other world regions in the sense that the region would likely never have been conjured if not for political purposes. Thus, the Indo-Pacific construct is not just changing world politics but also altering the academic study of world politics in some important ways.

1. Defining Regions and the Renaissance of Regionalism Studies

The study of regionalism has a long pedigree but became more structured as an academic pursuit after the end of the Cold War. One of the perennial problems in regionalism studies – and, indeed, one of its primary preoccupations – is the (unclear) definition of regions and regionalism. Whereas “[s]cholars in history and political science seem to think that they will know a region when they see one” (Väyrynen, 2003: 26), scholars of regionalism studies are not so quick to assign labels. It has been said that regionalism studies have undergone four stages: early regionalism, old regionalism, new regionalism, and comparative regionalism. Early regionalism was mostly studied in the framework of “pan” continental movements in a very Western-oriented theoretical framework (Fawcett, 2012); this early field of regionalism scholars focused on the developments of the late 1880s and early 1900s (Jönsson and Tornqvist, 2000). As this article focuses on the contemporary period, this era of regionalism will not be considered at great length. Still, it warrants mentioning that early regionalism was influential and that its Western-oriented approach set the stage for what is now called “old regionalism”.

Scholars like Acharya (2012) and Söderbaum (2012) argue that, like early regionalism, old regionalism’s definition of regions and regionalization were mostly Eurocentric – that is, dominated by European integration theory and practices. Indeed, Western scholars initially began debating the theory of regionalism in the 1950s in the context of regional integration taking place in (Western) Europe, with an early theoretical framework focused on federalism, functionalism, and neo-functionalism (Hettne and Söderbaum, 2008: 63). It is hard to define these attempts to account for regionalization as true *theories* but they were influential approaches nonetheless, casting a long shadow over regionalism studies that persists to this day. It is worth noting that the formation of old regionalism took place in dialogue with political scientists such as Karl Deutsch, Joseph Nye, and Philippe Schmitter (Söderbaum, 2012: 10).

As mentioned above, the European experience of regional integration was highly influential upon the formation of old regionalism. Indeed, there was a tendency to explain all instances of regionalism and regionalization with reference to the European experience (Hettne, 2003: 34). One of the main focuses of the early discussions, for example, was economic integration, although the increasing tension of the Cold War ultimately helped to shift attention from an economic focus toward security cooperation. And one of the primary theoretical innovations occurred as a result of Stanley Hoffmann’s injunction that “soft regionalism” must give way to a focus on security (Hoffman, 1966: 866-867). Whereas soft regionalism had focused on economic regionalization (markets, cross-border trade, investment flows, and other activities performed by non-governmental actors) (see Hurrell, 1995: 334), the emphasis on security encouraged a more “realist” analysis.

In time, realism and state-centrism began to displace the focus on private and non-governmental actors (see, for example, Milward, 2000 and Puchala, 1971). Most noteworthy regionalism scholars from this period supported the state-centric approach (Söderbaum, 2016: 26).

Similar to other fields in International Relations, the end of the Cold War raised new questions for students of regions and regionalism. First, approaches such as constructivism began to challenge rationalist theories of International Relations. In the past, proto-constructivist work – such as that grounded in Donald Meinig’s idea of “culture blocs” (Bigelow, 2009) – had not gained much traction in the milieu of the Cold War. In the 1990s, however, constructivism seemed to offer something important. Raimo Väyrynen (2003: 27) explains the constructivist contribution to regional studies as follows:

“Constructivism stresses the instrumental uses of regionalism to promote specific political and economic ends. To constructivists, actors create social facts by assigning functions to various spatial units. ... Functions assigned to social facts can be either agentive or non-agentive; the former serve the intentions of actors, but the latter happen independently.”

Partly thanks to greater pluralism within the field, scholars began to ask new questions regarding regionalism. A cleavage emerged between those who identified “outside-in” processed of regional development and those who preferred “inside-out” approaches (Neumann, 2003). Some scholars from this so-called “new regionalism” school claimed that regions can be “made, remade, and unmade” by collective human action and transformations in identities (Söderbaum, 2012: 13). Overall, new-regionalism scholars began to develop less Eurocentric approaches to the study of regions, blending elements of constructivism and the rationalism of the old-regionalism practitioners.

To be sure, there is a certain amount of confusion about the distinctive characteristics of old and new regionalism (Söderbaum, 2016: 16); the two overlap to a considerable degree. Yet several characteristics of new regionalism can be identified with some confidence: scholars in this tradition are multidimensional and more pluralistic; they are less focused on state-centric notions of security and protectionist trade policies; and considerable analytic weight is accorded to civil society and business actors (Hettne, Inotai and Sunkel, 1999). Another important feature of new regionalism is its fundamental challenge to the idea that “natural” or “given” regions can exist in world politics. As Gearóid Tuathail (2002: 28) puts it: “Geopolitics is made not given.”

Building upon (and in some respects supplanting) old regionalism and new regionalism, the third theoretical approach to regions here is comparative regionalism. Scholars such as Amitav Acharya (2014) and Peter Katzenstein (2005) founded comparative regionalism as a field of study with a view to developing non-Western insights into the formation of world regions with a focus on Asian regionalism. Part of the comparative regionalism endeavor has been to redefine what the concept of “region” means in bare terms. In this tradition, scholars such as Barry Buzan (2003) have argued that there are no natural or scientific regions, and the definition of a region can change according to the problem (Buzan and Wæver, 2003, see also Söderbaum, 2009). Although comparative regionalism shares some common theoretical tenets with constructivism, then, comparative regionalism also includes elements of critical International Relations theory (see, for example, Hamanaka, 2011). One of the important features of comparative regionalism is that scholars in this tradition tend explicitly to address the global world after the 2000s, with the geopolitical realities of this era heavily influencing scholars’ perspectives on regions. As Katzenstein (2005) has put it, there is a “regional world order” in the contemporary era, whereas perhaps there was not in the past (or will be in the future).

As illustrated in Table 1, the various schools of thought discussed above – old regionalism, new regionalism, and comparative regionalism – differ in terms of their adherence to rationalist and/or constructivist tenets, who and what they identify as the primary actors in regionalism studies, and their ontological view of regions as material or ideational edifices. Approaches that draw more heavily on rationalism tend to claim that regions are pre-given and policy-driven frameworks, while, on the other side, constructivists and other critics of rationalism view regions as “not given” and contend that all regions are socially constructed and politically contested (Jessop, 2003: 183; see also Söderbaum 2012: 12).

	Old Regionalism	New Regionalism	Comparative Regionalism
Actors	States	States vs Non-State Actors - active civil society and business	State and Non-State Actors
Regional form	Formal	Formal vs Informal	Formal and Informal
Main theoretical framework	Rationalists	Rationalists vs social constructivist	Social Constructivist and Critical approaches
Formalization of regions	Given	Social Constructed, contested	Complex and contested
Sectors	Security and Economy	Multisector	Multisector
Keywords	Regional cooperation, economic development, nation-building	Social and economic integration, no natural regions	Regional world order, eclectic and inclusive

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of the “Three Regionalisms”²

2. Regionalism in Asia

As noted above, Eurocentric perspectives on regionalism studies have been highly influential within the field³. According to Söderbaum (2012: 16), the dominance of European integration theory and practice has affected the study of regionalism in all corners of the world, including Asia. Most obviously, perhaps, students of regionalism disagree over where and what Asia even is. To be sure, there have been some regional attempts to broadly conceptualize and define Asia. Perhaps the first such attempt at Asian regionalism was the Asian Relations Conference held in New Delhi in 1947 and 1949 (the latter was also called ‘The Conference on Indonesia’), followed by the Asian-Africa Conference in Bandung in 1955. In these conferences, Asian countries tried to establish a mutual political agenda based upon common interests. However, after the establishment of post-colonial nation-states – and especially following border conflicts between China and India, and political competition between Nehru and Sukarno as sponsoring countries of the Conference (Acharya, 2016: 343) – attempts to forge a pan-Asian community lost much of their impetus. Even so, the formation of the ASEAN in 1967 went some way toward suppressing conflict and stopping the balkanization of the Southeast Asian region (He, 2016: 1).

² This chart based on Söderbaum (2016), p.21.

³ Eurocentrism was so strong in the past, for example, that one of the first studies of regionalism from the non-Western world published in the English language (K.M. Panikkar’s India Quarterly article, Regionalism and World Security from 1946) paid almost exclusive attention to Europe and North America, despite the author not being from either of those regions (Panikkar 1946, p.120).

However, India was conscious of the newly formed ASEAN because India had a tendency to see ASEAN as a “reincarnation” of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) and American conspiracy to use Southeast Asian states to serve its Cold-War design in the region (Sridharan, 1993: 118) and also India was not drawn to ASEAN because the regional grouping was believed to be redundant to India’s immediate security interest (Tai Yon and Mun, 2009: 22). As a result, India had a cool attitude towards to ASEAN. On the other side, according to He (2016), the founding of ASEAN marked the true advent of Asian regionalism, with other benchmark moments including the formation of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum in 1989, the establishment of the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) process in 1997, the attendance of the United States and Russia at the East Asia Summit (EAS) in 2010, and the establishment of the ASEAN Community in 2015.

It might be said, then, that there have been two Asian regionalisms rather than one Asian regionalism: the first centering on ASEAN and the second including the countries of what is sometimes known as the Asia-Pacific or East Asia. The success of ASEAN – a seemingly sustainable regional organization – can partly be explained through an old-regionalist lens, in the sense that its formation driven by self-interested states (Söderbaum, 2016: 25). However, the subsequent expansion of ASEAN cannot as easily be explained by old regionalism, which seems to be more about changing identities, interdependence, and internationalization. Since the 1990s, for example, ASEAN has been busily knitting Southeast and Northeast Asia together into a more unified regional unit (Buzan, 2012: 5). After expanding its own borders to include new members, ASEAN established relations with other regional powers - especially China, Japan, and South Korea in the form of the APT – and thus lent its institutional framework for the purpose of allowing some limited institutionalization in Northeast Asia (Yeo, 2018). According to Beeson (2003) and Terada (2003), economic crises in Asia (and the desire to avoid future such crises) have been one factor contributing to more cooperation between states of these sub-regions. Yet even this wider cooperation between Southeast and Northeast Asia is not quite comprehensive, given that APT does not include North Korea or Taiwan. By simply avoiding conflict, the APT process and related institutions do nothing to advance political collaboration to deal with some of the most important issues in the region, for instance the nuclearization of North Korea and the political status of Taiwan.

The concept of an Asia-Pacific region (or sub-region) has developed differently from that of Southeast Asia. Here, the expansion of trade and investment ties has been important in defining belongingness to East Asia or the Asia-Pacific. The concept of the Asia-Pacific was quite popular in the 1960s as a result of the anti-communism policies of the United States with its aid policy (please see McMahon, 1999). Asia-Pacific includes Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, Oceania, and parts of the Americas, including at least five advanced economies (the United States, Japan, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand). After the Cold War, regional groupings in the Asia-Pacific region have continued to flourish, almost always on the basis of providing perceived economic benefits to member states (Rumley, 2005: 13). The concept of the Asia-Pacific as an economic sphere was formalized in processes such as the establishment of APEC in the late 1980s, an example of soft regionalism (Kahler, 2000). According to Rory Medcalf (2018: 16), this conceptualization of the Asia-Pacific as a zone of economic security had two primary aims: first, it reinforced the strategic and economic role of the United States in Asia; and second, it helped to establish a more concrete economic partnership between the United States and industrialized countries in Asia. In this sense, the naming of the Asia-Pacific blends elements of the old and new regionalisms: it reflected some states’ interests, especially those of the United States, but also built upon more organic processes of economic cooperation and deep integration.

Southeast Asia and the Asia-Pacific have therefore taken on some degree of institutionalization as recognizable and distinct parts of Asia. To varying degrees, the same might also be said of Central Asia, South Asia, and parts of Southwest Asia. By contrast, there are no pan-Asian regional institutions to rival ASEAN, APT, APEC, or the EAS. What, then, of the prospect for comprehensive Asian regionalism? One attempt to theorize the existence of such a regional entity was put forward by Barry Buzan (2012) with his notion of an Asian Supercomplex, which suggests a tripolar Asian system incorporating Northeast, Southeast, and South Asia regional security complexes that overlap to produce Asia-wide security interdependency and complicated security relations. Buzan (2012) claimed that the rise of India and South Asia was causing more exclusive regionalism in Asia rather than inclusive pan-regionalism.

3. Indo-Pacific and Regionhood

3.1. Indo-Pacific: An Artificial Concept

The second decade of the 21st century has seen the gradual inclusion of the term Indo-Pacific as a new spatial framework in the strategic discourse of Asia (Shekhar, 2018: 80). To be sure, the general concept of the Indian and Pacific Oceans being conjoined to some degree has a long pedigree; although the exact term “Indo-Pacific” only grew in popularity after the “Confluence of Two Seas” speech by Japanese Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe, in 2007 (despite the fact that Abe did not actually use the phrase Indo-Pacific in his speech), it is a label and concept that can be traced back at least as far as the late 19th century (Medcalf, 2018: 15). Australian defense documents discussed security concerns across the “Indo-Pacific Basin” well into the 1960s (Medcalf, 2018: 15), for example. In 1948, meanwhile, the United Nations established the Indo-Pacific Fisheries Council, which included Burma, China, France, India, the Netherlands, the Philippines, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The name of this organization was changed to the Asia-Pacific Fisheries Commission in 1993 (Shekhar, 2018: 82). Geopolitically, the concept of a coherent Indo-Pacific was first articulated by Karl Haushofer who coined the term “Indopazifischen Raum” (Prabhakar, 2014: 6) in reference to what he saw as the “dense Indo-Pacific concentration of humanity and cultural empire of India and China [...] geographically sheltered behind the protective veil of the offshore island arcs” (quoted in Jha and Xuan Vinh, 2021: 15; please see Saurabh, 2018). Alfred Thayer Mahan and Nicholas J. Skykman also discussed the importance of the Indo-Pacific in geostrategic terms (Prabhakar, 2014: 6).

Today, however, the “Indo-Pacific presents the idea and imagery of the two oceanic regions of the Indian and Pacific Oceans [meshing together]” (Kiyota, 2014; Saha, 2015: 20), a process of regional identity-formation rather than a description of the Indian and Pacific Oceans’ military-strategic importance. The meaning and implications of contemporary usages of the “Indo-Pacific” label can be examined from various perspectives (Saha, 2015). It could be argued, for example, that the Indo-Pacific is an answer to economic development in the region. After all, Asia may be one of the most dynamic regions in the world, especially when it comes to economic development, and thus it might be expected that Asia’s shifting economic organization would result in changing patterns of regional nomenclature (Hu, 2009). In recent decades, the rise of China has forced a reevaluation of Asian politics and economics. Since 2008, in particular, China has expanded its power and influence across Asia with its constellation of megaprojects, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Covering more than 140 countries (not just in Asia), BRI participants account for around 40 percent of world GDP, while 63 percent of the world’s population lives within the borders of BRI countries (Sacks, 2021).

As Yeo (2019: 156) claims, the BRI, which is neither multilateral nor formal in nature, may reflect China’s long-term regional ambitions. In addition to the BRI, China proposed the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in 2013 (it was formally established in 2016) for the purpose of financing regional infrastructure projects in Asia.

From one perspective, China-driven economic interconnectedness could have spurred greater integration among Asian states across the continent. The BRI and AIIB could have helped to break down barriers between Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, Central Asia, Southwest Asia, and so on; or, at least, new pan-regional institutions and summitry could have emerged in response to China’s rise. Instead, however, these developments led to anxiety among some states about rise of China, including in the United States, which rejected the AIIB and criticized the BRI. Instead of spurring regionalization *inclusive* of China, changing economic and security dynamics in Asia led to an alternative narrative: the invention of the Indo-Pacific as a region mostly *exclusive* of China.

In 2007, Japanese Prime Minister Abe used the term “Broader Asia” in an appeal for greater cooperation between India and Japan. He described the Pacific and Indian Oceans as a dynamically coupled maritime space, albeit one with blurred boundaries. After Abe’s speech, the United States appeared to adopt the term in 2010 when President Obama’s Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, used the Indo-Pacific concept to explain increased United States maritime security cooperation with Australia, Singapore, and India (US Department of State 2010). Following Clinton, Indian Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh in 2012 used the Indo-Pacific idea to justify deep cooperation and engagement between India and ASEAN. Furthermore, Australia used the term “Indo-Pacific strategic arc” in its Defense White Paper in 2013 (Parliament of Australia 2013). The concept has now been accepted in common discourse and is used frequently in these countries’ foreign policies, despite handovers of power within each country (Wilson, 2018: 179).

One of the important turning points for the Indo-Pacific label was the declaration of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) Project by Japan in 2016. Kei Koga (2020: 50) asserts that the “primary objective of the FOIP strategy is to shape and consolidate regional order in the Indo-Pacific on the basis of the existing rules-based international order” (quoted in Nagy, 2021: 9). After the declaration of the FOIP, Australia, India, Japan and the United States have tended to use the new term Indo-Pacific instead of the older term Asia-Pacific. In May 2018, the United States military’s Pacific Command (USPACOM) was symbolically renamed to United States Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM), a move taken “in recognition of the increasing connectivity between the Indian and Pacific oceans,” in the words of then-Secretary of Defense James Mattis (quoted in Garamone 2018). The United States Department of Defense (2019) has also codified the language of the Indo-Pacific in the form of its Indo-Pacific Strategy Report.

It is worth emphasizing that the idea of the Indo-Pacific was coined, in part, to include one emerging regional actors – India – in the same regional unit as Japan, the United States, and others, while simultaneously excluding another important actor, China. Scholars such as Medcalf (2020: 6) openly accept that the Indo-Pacific is in some way an artificial region meant to provide an alternative mental map for Asia than China’s BRI. Tatyana Kolpakova and Tatiana Kuchinskaya (2015) agree that China has been pursuing a form of “new regionalism” with the intention of fostering a more multipolar world based on the principles of non-interventionism. The Indo-Pacific stands in opposition to this vision: a rhetorical effort by the United States and its close allies to create a different geopolitical construct that is based upon their national interests and preferred policies rather than China’s (Wilkins and Kim, 2022).

Along similar lines, Tomohiko Satake (2019: 69) views Japan’s FOIP as “a competitor” to China’s BRI programs because it “[provides] the region with alternatives to BRI projects” (Nagy, 2021: 9-10). The United States also has a competitive approach. Biden launched the Build Back Better World (B3W) initiative in 2021 as an alternative to BRI, which is undertaken by G7 governments. According to Panda (2021:3), Japan’s long-standing experience in providing quality infrastructure aid in the Indo-Pacific region makes it uniquely positioned to take forward the B3W’s infrastructure investment agenda.

It is worth mentioning that, according to some scholars, there is a constructivist basis for elevating the Indo-Pacific above the Asia-Pacific – namely, because the Indo-Pacific has a longer and richer history of interconnectedness than the Asia-Pacific. For example, it might be argued that the Indo-Pacific has a long history of existing as the manifestation of maritime Asia – a regionalized version of Asia that China has never been central to (Medcalf, 2020: 11). Another argument for embracing an idea of the Indo-Pacific exclusive of China is the claim that maritime regional trade offers a material basis for identifying the region as something distinct, just as other scientific disciplines such as biogeography have long been using the Indo-Pacific nomenclature on the basis of the region’s material naturalness in terms of biodiversity (Medcalf, 2020: 11; see also Nag, 1941). Such arguments, however, have difficulty explaining the timing of the Indo-Pacific label’s elevation over the Asia-Pacific in real-world political discourse – that is, why it was embraced as an organizing concept at the time that it was.

3.2. Is the Indo-Pacific a Region?

After the end of the Cold War, the dissolution of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia led to the emergence of new regional constructs. This was a direct result of the existence of newly independent countries. The Indo-Pacific, on the other hand, is the world’s newest region but is not the result of war, conflict, or new states. Rather, the four most important countries to its formulation as a region – Australia, India, Japan, and the United States – created a region at the discourse level and then began to adopt institutions that fit with this discourse, FOIP and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) being cases in point. Before 2007, most references to the Indo-Pacific were from marine science. After 2013, it was replaced by political science and International Relations.

On the other hand, however, it is fairly clear that the Indo-Pacific region has been created as a result of top-down processes. From this view, old regionalism’s state-centrism is the best lens for understanding the Indo-Pacific. Why else would Japan – one of the most important allies of the United States – but not China be included in the Indo-Pacific, despite both inhabiting the same Northeast Asian space? Most observers seem willing to concede that the creation of the Indo-Pacific region has been driven by political motives. Of course, these motives vary for the different countries in the region, and do not always complement one another; there is no single regional interest upon which the Indo-Pacific construct depends. So, while the Quad nations might share at least a limited agenda on security (vis-à-vis China), this agenda is not necessarily shared by the other countries in the region (such as several ASEAN members). Even inside the Quad, whose members are the most concerned about China’s rise, there is some domestic disagreement over security priorities. As Barry Buzan (1991) argued, there are different sectors within which states formulate security policies: economic, military, societal, political, and environmental. China may pose a threat in some of these domains but not others, while Indo-Pacific cooperation may promise to alleviate security concerns in some areas but not others. Japan, for example, has security concerns that touch upon multiple sectors including the environment, economy, and the military (Suzuki, 2022).

As a result, Japan has adopted a leading role in terms of FOIP, has introduced other projects such as the Partnership for Quality Infrastructure, and has changed its domestic bureaucracy to include an Economic Security Ministry. Australia, too, has economic and military concerns about China’s rise but also political anxieties about “Chinese influence” in domestic politics, which has emerged as a touchstone of Australia’s public policy discourse (Chubb, 2022). Especially China’s increasing influence in the Asia-Pacific islands is challenging for Australia. For example, Micronesia Federal States, the Republic of Kiribati, Nauru, and Palau withdraw from Pacific Islanders Forum and some claims that the real reason is the rising influence of China (please see Australian National University, 2022). In addition to that, China’s controversial security deal with the Solomon Islands was also highly criticized by Australia. For its part, India has traditional military concerns rooted in the Sino-Indian border dispute and China’s strong support for Pakistan, while the United States harbors a range of economic and military-security concerns (Congressional Research Service, 2022).

The Indo-Pacific and the incipient institutions that accompany the region serve as balancing mechanisms through which those anxious about China’s rise can cooperate, but it is not a security community. For some of the ASEAN countries, the rise of China is a risk but also an economic opportunity. According to the Lowy Institute’s Asia Power Index in 2021, China is the most powerful country in the region in terms of influential trade partnerships, with Beijing now the top trade partner of 18 countries in the region (Lowy Institute, 2021). Another problem with the Indo-Pacific region is China’s cultural and bilateral relations with the countries in the region; some ASEAN countries, in particular, are home to large Chinese diaspora communities, and are receiving loans from China as part of the BRI framework. China’s multifarious ties to the countries of the Indo-Pacific make it impossible to ignore and exclusive China altogether, despite the sidelining of Beijing being a major goal of the United States and others. If the Asia-Pacific discourse was criticized because it ignored India – a large, powerful, influential, and rising Asian power – then how can the Indo-Pacific discourse be any better given its exclusion of China?

The inescapable conclusion is that the Indo-Pacific is an artificial concept or discourse – one willed into existence by human actors despite the absence of elements typically associated with the birth of new regions, such as history, shared identity, norms, institutional or economic integration, and shared interests. Yet even if it is an artificial region, the Indo-Pacific is indisputably a region in the view of leading states. The question has become “Who is part of the Indo-Pacific?” and “Is there even an Indo-Pacific?” This is a triumph of elite-level discourse over the factors that scholars have argued tend to shape regionalization. This raises the question: Is there a new chapter in regionalism studies? What theoretical innovations must be adopted to account for the new realities? As previously mentioned, the formation of APT constituted another similar experiment, demanding scholars to explain the unexpected efforts of ASEAN to reach into Northeast Asia.

3.3. Making Theoretical Sense of the Indo-Pacific

To better evaluate the Indo-Pacific’s “performance” as a world regional as traditionally conceived by the regionalism literature, this section applies the theoretical precepts in Table 1 to the empirical case of the Indo-Pacific. The first dimension along which the Indo-Pacific can be analyzed is actors: Who have been the most important actors in the formation of the Indo-Pacific? It seems clear, in this case, that states have been most central to establishing the Indo-Pacific, and that state-level meetings and agenda-driving is an obvious feature of Indo-Pacific regionalism.

There is no civil society that spans the region, and business actors mostly eschew any elite-level requests to exclude China. Although there are some international institutions like FOIP and the Quad, these are mostly state-centric organizations that exert no power or influence independent of their constituent members. In this regard, it could be argued that the Indo-Pacific is closer to the old-regionalist model of regionalization, which emphasizes the existence of state-created organizations such as ASEAN and the European Union.

The second dimension along which any regional can be analyzed is its regional form, whether informal or formal. In this sense, the Indo-Pacific can be viewed to have taken on some degree of formalization, including in the domestic bureaucracies of some states. Japan, for example, has already begun targeting overseas development assistance projects – and even some peacebuilding operations – commensurate with FOIP. Examples include a project to tackle unexploded ordnance in Laos, aimed at strengthening the capacity of Laotian authorities to undertake vital human security work; the Project on Capacity Development on Assisting Victims of Trafficking in the Greater Mekong Sub-regional Countries in Thailand; Indo-Japanese cooperation in Myanmar’s Rakhine State in the areas of housing, education, and electrification; and peacebuilding work in Mindanao in the Philippines (Japan Ministry of Defense, 2022). At least in the case of Japan, then, the use of formal agencies to reify the existence of an Indo-Pacific region – and the pro-peace, reformist character that Japan is giving to its Indo-Pacific outreach – would seem to most closely match the comparative regionalism theoretical framework.

Third, regions can be assessed in terms of which theoretical framework would seem to best explain their creation and widespread acceptance. This article has argued that constructivism does not easily explain why the Indo-Pacific region was established. Although constructivist precepts can explain why the region was *permitted* to be established – its ontological claims that geographical concepts can be reconsidered, that there are no “natural” or “unnatural” regions, and that regions are essentially social constructs, allow for few restrictions on the types of regions that can be assembled – constructivists struggle to explain when and why the United States, Japan, and Australia (allies during the Cold War) converged with India, which has maintained a non-alignment principle in its foreign policy since independence, to support the creation of the Indo-Pacific. In 1946, for example, Jawaharlal Nehru stated that “we propose, as far as possible, to keep away from the power politics of groups, aligned against one another, which have led in the past to world wars and which may again lead to disasters on an even vaster scale” (Fabian 2019); and in the 1950s, India rejected taking a side in the Korean War. The non-aligned principle continued in the Cold War, and India was officially part of the Non-Aligned Movement. So why in the 21st century has New Delhi edged away from non-alignment to join with the other Quad members to form a fairly explicit anti- China front? A critical approach may be able to shed greater light on this question, but unfortunately there are few such studies in existence. One possible explanation could be Indo-Soviet relations, especially after the 1971 Indo-Soviet Partnership agreement. Non-Aligned Movement had an interest in the Soviet Union, and some of the countries in the region were part of the Non-Aligned Movement as well. However, after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (which was a Non-Aligned Movement member) in 1979, the dynamics between Indo-Soviet relations changed drastically to shift pragmatic ways after the New Delhi Declaration in 1981.

Fourth, regions can be categorized by their mode of formalization, whether assumed to be “given,” constructed, or contested. In the case of the Indo-Pacific, it seems clear that the region is not given or yet fully socially constructed. Although some scholars have argued that the Indo-Pacific is a given region, albeit a forgotten one, the consensus view is that the Indo-Pacific does not fit the description of a “natural” region. And while there is certainly an element of social construction to the Indo-Pacific, it was driven not by ideas at the level of civil society but discourse among governmental elites. In short, the Indo-Pacific is a top-down concept that was articulated, promulgated, and embraced by elite-level actors. The shared identity between peoples and states in the region is questionable, to say the least.

Next, there is the question of which sectors are included in the Indo-Pacific construct for the purposes of regionalization. It should be obvious that economic and security concerns are the primary areas of cooperation and contestation in the Indo-Pacific. However, it would be wrong to reduce all countries’ motivations to these sectors alone, especially as the security concerns of Indo-Pacific states are not confined to “traditional” security concerns. Rather, the meaning and tools of security have changed drastically since the Cold War. As a result, it would be wrong to adopt an overly narrow conception of security when thinking about the Indo-Pacific; a better approach would be Buzan’s security-sector approaches, discussed above.

Finally, the Indo-Pacific can be analyzed according to key words and signature phrases. In this regard, the Indo-Pacific is invoked using language common to all theories of regionalism. Economic development, for example, is frequently touted by state actors such as Australia and Japan. So is the concept of regional cooperation, especially in the form of joint military exercises. Inclusive, eclectic, and the idea of the FOIP stand out as other keywords commonly associated with the Indo-Pacific by those who discuss it the most – including non-resident powers such as European countries. One example could be France’s interest in the Indian Ocean due to its own Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ). The French EEZ in the Indian Ocean accounts for more than 20% of France’s total EEZ (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs of France).

Conclusion

The Indo-Pacific is the world’s newest and most important region. Unlike other new regions, however, it is neither the product of wars nor the creation of newly independent states. Why, then, did it emerge? This article has argued that the concept of the Indo-Pacific does not neatly accord with any existing theory of regionalism, yet it is accepted as a region in real-world politics. That is, there is a clear common discourse and emerging regional institutions such as FOIP and the Quad that give shape to the Indo-Pacific as an empirical entity. For that reason, the Indo-Pacific can best be defined as an artificial concept – a set of ideas that arose through sheer political will rather than the organic interpretation of material realities.

Why is it important to probe and explain the emergence of regionalist ideas like the Indo-Pacific? As Kenneth Waltz (1979: 69) argued, a theory is required to explain behavioral patterns, not one-off changes. Although the Indo-Pacific fits some parts of old regionalism and some parts of new regionalism, it lacks a regional agenda and has very blurred boundaries. For example, ASEAN countries have accepted parts of Japan’s FOIP concept while challenging others, leaving the scope of FOIP unclear. Some explain the existence of the Indo-Pacific as a balancing mechanism against China, yet not all countries in the Indo-Pacific share the goal of containing China. Indeed, most of them – such as ASEAN countries – are unwilling to choose between the Indo-Pacific and BRI mental maps.

For example, when FOIP declared, it was declared as a strategy, but after some ASEAN countries, such as Singapore, found the word “strategy” quite strong, FOIP was started to refer to as a “vision”. It could be argued that these countries prefer multilateralism instead of great power rivalry in the region. ASEAN countries’ preference is to participate in both geostrategic projects. Countries like Vietnam, Singapore, Indonesia, and to some extent, Thailand shows their interest in the Indo-Pacific concept. On the other side, there are also countries like Cambodia, the Philippines, and Malaysia, which are still silently observing the development of the Indo-Pacific. Even the four leading countries of the Indo-Pacific (the Quad) have a complex interdependence with China and different priorities regarding security.

The primary motivation for those states is to feel secure about the rise of China in the region and, primarily, to protect their interests in various areas. The security priorities are different for individual countries in the region. One example could be the Philippines and Indonesia’s positions. They are more enthusiastic about the BRI and have the possibility to establish more cooperation ties with China. However, it is hard for them to develop a close relationship with China because of the territorial and maritime disputes between the Philippines and China. On the other hand, Indonesia is committed to becoming the ASEAN’s leading nation, tends to limit the influence of other countries, and is particularly sensitive to the rising influence of other big powers in the ASEAN. In addition, this newly emerging region is seen as a possible way to establish new alliances and escape “regional” conflicts of Northeast, Southeast, and South Asia. This article evaluates the new phenomena of creating a region and related future possibilities and/or limitations for Indo-Pacific countries as well as for other regions which experience regional problems and tend to establish new regions instead of constructed ones. If the Indo-Pacific transformed into a real region, it also could mean opening a new chapter in regionalism studies.

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