

INDO-PACIFIC: JAPAN, CHINA AND THE REGIONAL POWER SHIFT

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Executive Summary

1. 'Indo-Pacific' is a new term in the geo-political lexicon and a response to rapidly evolving global power shifts inducing strategic realignments among major regional players alongside intense power struggles between the United States and China.
2. 'Indo-Pacific' is increasingly used globally today by political leaders, policymakers, journalists and academic commentators and in government documents. It was Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe who first articulated the new geographical space, albeit not the term itself, in his 'Confluence of the Two Seas' speech to the Indian parliament in 2007.
3. In December 2012, Japan began to push the strategic concept of Indo-Pacific and extend westward the geographic/ geostrategic reach of the earlier regional concept of 'Asia-Pacific' to incorporate India, another rising Asian power that shares some regional strategic concerns and interests with Japan, the United States and Australia.
4. Japan has taken a lead role in initiating a new geo-political space in the past. Indeed, Japan with Australia co-created the idea of Asia Pacific culminating in the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum in 1989. While Japan led the Asia-Pacific concept from behind, it is leading this new notion of Indo-Pacific from the front.
5. By design, the 'Indo-Pacific' conceptually and operatively has greater strategic weight than the 'Asia-Pacific'. Tokyo pursues this mindfully in a changing regional and global environment where the United States is weakening in its global influence and China is ascending and flexing economic and military muscles, raising concerns in many capitals.
6. Japan's strategic partners, Canberra, New Delhi and now Washington, have endorsed and embraced the Indo-Pacific concept but through the lens of their own national interests and strategic designs so there is no clear roadmap of its aims.

7. Southeast Asian nations have neither enthusiastically endorsed nor outrightly rejected the concept. They are reluctant to support a particular strategic construct that has the potential of dividing major powers and positioning them against China. Their main interest is to maintain the centrality of ASEAN, as they did successfully in the Asia-Pacific era.
8. China has expressed deep concern with the concept as it perceives it as being designed to contain China's strategic engagement in its neighbourhood and beyond.
9. The Indo-Pacific concept has yet to be institutionalised. Some offshoots, such as the rebirthed idea of a quadrilateral framework among the key proponents of 'free and open Indo-Pacific' and their proposal to jointly fund infrastructure projects in Asia, appear to be in direct competition with China's Belt and Road Initiative.
10. How the Indo-Pacific concept will affect the regional power balance remains unclear. However, neither the concept nor the strategic thinking and actions it inspires will disappear anytime soon.