

INDIA AS AN ASIA-PACIFIC POWER

In April 1942 a seemingly invincible Japanese army stood at India's eastern border after having conquered the whole of Southeast Asia in the space of weeks. Most of the British East Indies Fleet had fled to Africa and the gates of India lay open. But the Japanese Army stopped where it was and never tried to overthrow the British Raj. There were several reasons why, but underlying it all was the simple fact that India did not then form part of Japan's 'mental map' of Asia.

Mental maps matter. We all use mental maps to divide the world up into chunks that we are better able to understand and deal with. One of the most important mental maps for Australia over the last several decades has been the idea of the 'Asia-Pacific'. Although the Asia Pacific is now a ubiquitous part of our geographical landscape its shape is set to change substantially in coming years. It is something that Australia in particular needs to be prepared for.



The Indo-Pacific Region?

The idea of the Asia-Pacific as a region is a relatively recent one. It was initially pushed during the 1970s and 1980s by countries such as Japan and Australia that wanted to better bind the United States with the economically vibrant East Asia. Although primarily driven by economics, the idea of the Asia-Pacific has always had a strong underlying security element: keeping the United States as a benign offshore balancer and the main security provider to the region. It also gave Australia an opportunity to bind itself closer to East Asia as a 'Pacific' nation if not strictly an 'Asian' one.

Nevertheless, Australia's mental map of the Asia-Pacific never really extended to South Asia. Asia-Pacific institutions such as ASEAN and its spin-offs and APEC

were built without India. Nor did India see itself as part of the Asia-Pacific. In the decades following its independence India saw itself as a champion of colonised peoples throughout Asia and elsewhere. But while India produced plenty of rhetoric, there was little practical engagement with the newly independent states of East Asia in terms of their economic or security needs. India was focused on its own economic development based on autarchy and state ownership and its own security preoccupations in South Asia. Through the Cold War, India's main contribution to Asia-Pacific security was to complain about the regional security role of the United States, including its alliances with Australia, Japan and other Pacific allies.

But the astounding economic growth of China, and now India, changes these assumptions. The rise of China is unsettling the security of the region and forcing East Asian states to look for new partners. The opening of the Indian economy is also arguably pulling the centre of economic gravity in Asia westwards. India's trade and investment relationships in East Asia are growing dramatically. India is also developing security relationships throughout the region - primarily with Japan, Vietnam, Singapore and Australia, but also with others. India is now welcomed by many countries in East Asia as an important economic and strategic balance to the growing power of China. The growing presence of the Indian Navy in the South China Sea is just one manifestation of India's security ambitions in the region. Although China now downplays any Indian role in the Pacific, it may have little choice but to accept a growing Indian security presence.

In dealing with this changing reality, it won't be enough just to bring India into existing Asia Pacific institutions such as APEC and then carry on business as usual. We need to consider some of the more fundamental consequences of including the Indian subcontinent in our mental map of Asia. The changes wrought by India's rise and its engagement with East Asia will be profound and not always smooth - as India finds its voice and as powerful states in northeast Asia see a relative loss of influence in shaping the regional agenda.

Many strategic thinkers in the United States, India and Australia are already talking about the idea of the 'Indo-Pacific'. They increasingly see the Indian and Pacific oceans as an interdependent strategic and economic space stretching from Vladivostok to the shores of Somalia. But the Indo-Pacific is still little more than a concept and there are many questions as to how this can be put into practice. As US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton recently commented,

How we translate the growing connection between the Indian and Pacific Oceans into an operational concept is a question that we need to answer if we are to adapt to new challenges in the region.¹

What does this mean for Australia? Australia is uniquely placed to take advantage of this shift. While Australia lies at the extreme southern end of East Asia, it lies close to

the centre of the Indo-Pacific region. We are a major resources and energy exporter to the whole of the Indo-Pacific. We are potentially also a major force of the Indo-Pacific. This is why the US-Australia alliance is being expanded from a Pacific partnership into an Indo-Pacific one.

Australia also needs to consider how it can frame its growing relationship with India as an Indo-Pacific partnership. That means seeking out potential areas for security cooperation, and particularly maritime security cooperation, in the Indian Ocean, Southeast Asia and the western Pacific. There are numerous possibilities for cooperation between India and Australia and ASEAN states in enhancing maritime security in Southeast Asia in particular, including in areas such as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), capacity building and maritime domain awareness.



Indian Navy Ship Mumbai (D62) begins her replenishment at sea approach on HMAS Success, during a passage exercise enroute to Qingdao, China, for participation in the People's Liberation Army Navy 60th Anniversary International Review in 2009.

With the most capable navies of Indian Ocean littoral states, India and Australia have much to offer the region in HADR. India and Australia, along with the United States and Japan, were key players in the multilateral naval response effort to the 2004 tsunami, including in Indonesia and Thailand. This generated a great deal of regional goodwill. It also represented a major turning point in Indian thinking about the potential for cooperation with other maritime powers and led to later proposals for security cooperation such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue among key Indo-Pacific democracies.

Assistance in building the capacity of ASEAN states to provide maritime security is another fruitful area for

cooperation between India and Australia. To date, India has largely focused its capacity building efforts in Southeast Asia on its longstanding political ally, Vietnam. Over the last decade or so this has included the provision of training, spare parts for Soviet-vintage patrol craft and aircraft maintenance. In recent years, Australia actively expanded cooperation with both Indonesia and the Philippines on maritime security and counter-terrorism. Indonesia has numerous requirements to build its maritime security capabilities. These include the need for modern vessels as well as aerial surveillance capabilities, coastal radar and coastguard training.² Coordinated assistance by both India and Australia in these areas could maximise the benefits for Indonesia as well as forming a foundation for a broader trilateral relationship.

Another potential area for cooperation in Southeast Asian/Indian Ocean maritime security is in improved maritime domain awareness. This would likely initially focus on the main straits used by shipping transiting the Indonesian archipelago. Over the last decade or so India has given significant focus to improving its maritime domain awareness throughout the Indian Ocean region. This has included considerable investments by India in maritime intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities. In July 2012, India opened a new Naval Air Station on Great Nicobar island, India's nearest possession to the Malacca Strait, primarily for maritime surveillance activities. Australia already has considerable maritime ISR capabilities throughout the eastern Indian Ocean in areas which abut or overlap with areas of strategic interest to India. In coming years, both India and Australia are acquiring P-8 Poseidon aircraft and (likely) Global Hawk UAVs as the backbone of their maritime ISR capabilities. This will create unprecedented opportunities for cooperation in training, maintenance and information sharing. It has been suggested that India and Australia could jointly sponsor a Regional Maritime Domain Partnership which would involve collaboration with Southeast Asian states in intelligence sharing, maritime domain awareness and coordinated patrolling.³ This could be a useful way of advancing ISR cooperation while also satisfying Indian political sensitivities about regional security partnerships that do not necessarily involve direct reliance on the United States.

Australia needs to think about how we can take a key role in helping to build and shape an Indo-Pacific community, just as we took a leading role in building the idea of the Asia-Pacific. By joining together in Southeast Asia, India and Australia could help give some strategic form to a new Indo-Pacific region.

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¹ Hillary Clinton, 'America's Pacific Century', *Foreign Policy*, November 2011.

² See generally, Andrew Forbes (ed), *Maritime Capacity Building in the Asia Pacific Region*, *Papers in Australian Maritime Affairs*, No. 30, Sea Power Centre - Australia, Canberra, 2010.

³ Commander Shishir Upadhyaya, 'India and Australia Relations: Scope for Naval Cooperation', National Maritime Foundation, 4 December 2009.

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