

# Russia, China, and the concept of Indo-Pacific

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## Abstract

The newly minted concept of the “Indo-Pacific Region” (IPR) is generally seen as a response by the United States and its allies to China’s growing influence in strategically important areas of the Pacific and Indian oceans. However, the view of IPR as a single (U.S.-led) anti-Beijing front is simplistic and misleading, obscuring a variety of approaches by the region’s states. New Delhi has a strong tradition of non-alignment, whereas Tokyo is more interested in rules that restrict unilateral actions not only by China but also by other regional players, including the United States. Australian business is very cautious about frictions in trade relations with China. Beijing views the growing military activity of the United States off its shores, including in the South China Sea, as a threat to regional stability. According to the authoritative Chinese sources, the Indo-Pacific strategy of Donald Trump is part of broader efforts to prevent China from becoming a dominant regional and global power. At the same time, the development of Association of Southeast Asian Nations’ (ASEAN) understanding of the Indo-Pacific region is less of a concern to Beijing, as the South-East Asian countries interested in balancing China and the United States are unlikely to fully join the fight against the “authoritarian threat.” As for Russia, it unequivocally rejects the military/power-based U.S. version of the IPR concept and is more amenable to flexible versions promoted by other players, such as Tokyo’s multilateral vision for the Indo-Pacific Region. In the end, the final response of Russia and China to IPR will thus be determined not only by U.S. actions but also by the behavior of other regional powers.

## Keywords

China, Eurasia, foreign policy, Indo-Pacific region, Russia, strategy, United States

## Introduction

President Donald Trump presented his vision of a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” as his country’s strategy toward Asia during a visit to the continent in November 2017. Officially, the concept only declared the basis of the U.S. foreign strategy, which was written into a number of the country’s official documents (the National Security Strategy and the National Defense Strategy) in 2017–2018. However, politicians, academics, and foreign policy experts had been discussing the prospects of developing the Indo-Pacific for some time before that. The Obama administration had also made attempts to use the Indo-Pacific as a conceptual cornerstone of U.S. foreign policy in Asia. In 2011, *Foreign Policy* magazine published an article by Hillary Clinton (Clinton, 2011) in which she uses the term “Indo-Pacific” to refer to the region that stretches from the Indian Ocean to

the Pacific Ocean, noting its significance in terms of strengthening the United States’ positions in the region.

The term first gained popularity in political and academic circles in India, the United States, Japan, and Australia back in the 2000s. During a visit to India in 2007, the Prime Minister of Japan Shinzo Abe gave a speech about the “confluence of the two seas,” meaning the Indian

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and Pacific oceans, and the creation of a “broader Asia” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2007). Since 2010, many countries have adopted the term “Indo-Pacific” as a new geographical concept of Asian regionalism. Having united the countries in the Indian Ocean, it expands the existing concept of the “Asia-Pacific” to the west.

Moscow and Beijing have criticized the advancement of the Indo-Pacific strategy that lies at the heart of the U.S. policy in Asia, claiming that the American side is using it to contain its main geopolitical rivals. The negative reaction was perhaps louder and more widespread in Russia, while the harsh criticism in China was mostly reserved for expert publications. The newly minted concept of the “Indo-Pacific Region” (IPR) is generally seen as a response by the United States and its allies to China’s growing influence in strategically important areas of the Pacific and Indian oceans. This geopolitical and security context prevails for now. However, Russia and China pursue scaled geo-economic visions: Belt and Road—for China, the Eurasian integration, and the Greater Eurasia for Russia. Russia and China have to accommodate their perceptions of the Indo-Pacific strategy not only to their geopolitical views but also to their geo-economic activities in Eurasia. The view of IPR as a single (U.S.-led) anti-Beijing front is simplistic and misleading, obscuring a variety of approaches by the region’s states. Our analysis of the attitudes of Moscow and Beijing to the Indo-Pacific strategy fits into the broader context of various regional “visions” of this concept, which allows us to conclude that the behavior of other regional powers will determine the responses of Russia and China to the actions of the United States.

### **What is in the concept? Literature review**

Rapid regional development and the growing interdependence of key Indo-Pacific players amid an increasing number of contradictions among them have caused the outside world to view the region as a “complex multi-layered” strategic system that extends beyond the borders of Southeast Asia and includes India and the Indian Ocean (Medcalf, 2012, p. 5). The concept of Indo-Pacific is an applied reflection of the transformation of the Asia-Pacific that is taking place as a result of the inclusion of the Indian Ocean States in the orbit of the economic processes taking place in East Asia, the laying of transport and logistics routes from Europe to East Asia via the Indian Ocean, and the transmutation of Pacific Asia and the Indian Ocean into a theater of geopolitical warfare between the United States and China (Streltsov, 2018). The concept of “Indo-Pacific” has gradually been closely combined with the word “strategy,” thereby resulting in the term “Indo-Pacific Strategy” (Chen & Wei, 2015).

Modern scientific discourse is developing in two directions: experts either focus on an analysis of the positions of

the countries involved and their approaches to the implementation of the Indo-Pacific concept (e.g., the so-called Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or QUAD, consisting of the United States, India, Japan, and Australia, or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations [ASEAN] countries), or they look at the prospects for multilateral partnership in other areas of interaction (e.g., security or economic cooperation). It is worth mentioning that the concept of the partnership itself is broadly discussed in the academic community as well, as far as there is no consensus on the definition. Usually, a partnership is considered a more comprehensive concept, including common goals and interests, as well as values and an ideological component (Maslova & Sorokova, 2019).

Most researchers point to regional security and transport connectivity as the basis of the Indo-Pacific concept. The Indo-Pacific is seen first and foremost as “a security-oriented construct, focused on managing maritime interdependencies which span the Pacific and Indian Oceans” (Wilson, 2017). The basic components of the Indo-Pacific include maritime security, that is, securing sea lanes of communication, freedom of navigation, maintaining an open and transparent rules-based order, abiding by international law, open dialogue and discussions, and fostering regional development by engaging in infrastructure and connectivity projects. This discourse on the “Indo-Pacific” grew from a geopolitical construct, a mental map that was slowly incorporated into various nation’s foreign policy interests, and security interests, albeit in ad hoc and limited manner (Prasad, 2018). A “free and open Indo-Pacific” should be based on the idea of freedom of navigation along the maritime trade routes that connect Europe and East Asia (Chaudhury, 2018).

Meanwhile, another group of researchers prioritizes economic cooperation. The strategy’s economic components cover three areas: trade, investment, and infrastructure development (Pitakdumrongkit, 2019, p. 36). In particular, Pence stresses that the United States also wants to promote investment in the private sector, including regional infrastructure development projects (White House, 2018), and Wilson (2017) notes that Asian countries are, in turn, interested in expanding investment “in creating an Indo-Pacific economic architecture.”

Most experts interpret the Indo-Pacific concept as the basis of the U.S. foreign policy strategy, which is aimed at the military and political containment of China through the development of bilateral and multilateral ties with Asia-Pacific countries (Grossman, 2018; Streltsov, 2018). Saeed (2017) sees the concept as “rebalancing efforts to sustain U.S. leadership in the Asia Pacific by strengthening political, security and economic ties with regional countries,” whereas Pejsova (2018) points out that “beyond the official rhetoric, the most obvious common interest remains the containment of China.” At the same time, experts note that “in order to avoid conflicts with the U.S. caused by

advancing eastwards, China continues its steps of expanding westwards by proposing the cross-border and inter-continental ‘Belt and Road Initiative’” (Jung & Chen, 2019).

China’s role in the implementation of the regional concept remains the subject of heated discussion in the scientific literature. Some experts believe that the high level of dependence on the Chinese economy is forcing Asian “middle powers,” such as India, Japan, Australia, and Indonesia, to hedge their potential economic and geopolitical risks (Prasad, 2018). They recognize that “multilateral exercises need to be conducted for maritime infrastructures such as the ports along the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road,” as well as the need to conduct such exercises in cooperation with China, deepen relations in non-traditional areas of security, disaster relief, and so on (Shimodaira, 2018). Others, on the contrary, call for QUAD to be an “inclusive mechanism” to be able to “reconcile with the wisdom of ASEAN-centred regionalism” as an “adaptable framework [that] would promote recognition of the QUAD as an anchor or idea incubator for issues-led functional cooperation for peace and stability of the Indo-Pacific” (Fukushima, 2018). The latter is, nonetheless, questionable due to several reasons, including these: ASEAN is unlikely to absorb the anti-Chinese sentiment, so central for QUAD, in the scope and intensity necessary for practical engagement with QUAD; besides, QUAD would lose its self-determination and prestige if too closely engaging with far more institutionally mature ASEAN.

### **The U.S. view of Indo-Pacific: securing American centrality**

One of the first things Donald Trump did as President of the United States was to withdraw the United States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPP). Nevertheless, this step (no matter how impulsive it may have seemed at the time) did not imply any fundamental changes and did not entail the United States shifting its attention away from Asia. The U.S. policy in Asia is no less active than it was during the previous administration. In fact, it is more consistent than the Obama administration’s Asia policy, focusing on two points: the containment of China in all areas and the maintenance of U.S. dominance in the region (which is seen as the key to maintaining global power).

Rather, the new Asia policy of the United States, including as part of the new Indo-Pacific concept, is essentially the very same strategic “rebalancing,” but with a number of tactical innovations:

1. The use of leverage to contain Beijing, primarily in connection with China, strengthening its position in the region’s economy due to the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI);
2. More assertive attempts to change the rules of the game without warning or permission (from

operations to ensure freedom of navigation in the South China Sea to increasing military and political support for Taiwan and flexing its military might by sending its warships to the Taiwan Strait);

3. Focusing efforts not only on spreading “liberal values” but also on strengthening and developing a network of US-centric partnerships to tackle its main opponent, China, more effectively.

The conceptual embodiment of this “pragmatic pivot to Asia,” according to Trump, is the strategy of a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific”.

With the growth of U.S.–China contradictions in trade and high technologies throughout 2018–2019, the idea of a free and open Indo-Pacific, first voiced by Trump during his speech at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit in Da Nang (Vietnam) in November 2017, is becoming a well-structured and highly developed strategy. The adjusted course of the “pivot to Asia” assumes significant practical content in both the economic and security spheres, which should ensure that this will be an “America’s century” in the mega-region. At the same time, a far greater emphasis is being placed on the idea of the relationship between economic issues and security in the Indo-Pacific.

The concept of a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” is now included in official U.S. documents that define the foundations of the country’s military and political strategy (the 2017 National Security Strategy and the 2018 National Defense Strategy). The National Defense Strategy calls for the creation of a “networked security architecture capable of deterring aggression, maintaining stability, and ensuring free access to common domains.” Simultaneously, as the 2017 National Security Strategy notes, a “geopolitical competition between free and repressive visions of world order is taking place in the Indo-Pacific region.” The countries in the region, especially the small and medium-sized ones, are thus forced to choose sides. Moreover, this choice increasingly based on ideology and values as the main threat to development and security in the region, as stated in the U.S. conceptual documents, comes from the “rise of authoritarianism.”

In June 2019, the U.S. Department of Defense released a strategic report entitled “Indo-Pacific Strategy Report. Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region,” which singles out the Indo-Pacific as the “priority” theater for the U.S. military. Meanwhile, the principles set out in the Pentagon report, which is by far the most elaborate conceptual document on the Indo-Pacific to date, are universal and serve a “dual purpose,” as they effectively extend to all spheres of U.S. politics in the region, even those that have little or nothing to do with defense and security.

Experts from the U.S. Department of Defense have also prepared a narrative to accompany this rebalancing 2.0.

The communications strategy of the United States consists of the following three main components:

1. Active positioning toward multilateral structures;
2. Demonstrating the advantages that the United States enjoys as the most powerful country economically and a reliable humanitarian partner (special emphasis is placed on educational and youth programs, working with non-governmental organizations [NGOs], and so on);
3. Emphasizing the historic role of the United States in the social and economic development of the region.

For example, the Pentagon report on the Indo-Pacific mentioned above notes that the United States helped create an open and democratic society in Taiwan, and this is what allowed the island to blossom into a hi-tech powerhouse. The 1970s and 1980s were a critical period in the shared history of the United States and Southeast Asia, as it was during this time that the United States started investing in Hong Kong, Singapore, and other countries in the region and supporting such fundamental institutions as the ASEAN, the APEC Forum, and the Asian Development Bank, thus contributing to the growth of the region.

The official American historical narrative, which has been conveniently cleansed of all negative facts (Vietnam is not mentioned at all, for example) and is openly directed against the Chinese idea of a “community of shared future for mankind,” positions the country not simply as a great power that historically and geographically belongs to the Pacific region and wields huge military potential, but also as a driver of economic growth, an author of the “Asian miracle” and a key stakeholder in the movement toward greater integration. According to the American logic, China has done very little to support regional political and economic development, yet still imposes its authoritarian model on the countries in the region or, at the very least, interferes in their domestic affairs.

The United States actively promotes this highly ideologized view at multilateral platforms and in its bilateral contacts with the countries in the region. The speech given by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to the Siam Society during his first visit to Thailand is particularly telling in this regard. According to Pompeo, the successful development of the region can be put down to two factors—trade and freedom. Furthermore, it is American politics, according to that very same official narrative, that has placed the United States at the center of the “Asian miracle.”

“The truth is the key shipping lanes of the Indo-Pacific were and are today protected by American sailors. And where colonial powers once demanded submission, America offered security,” Pompeo noted. The Secretary of State also talked about the role of the United States in building Asian regionalism institutions:

And the United States [. . .] was there with you all the way and it will be, helping you grow and forging ever-closer ties. We built APEC, we built ASEAN, and the Lower Mekong Initiative, and we did so with you, alongside of you.

Pompeo also noted in his Bangkok speech that the United States is the preferred trade and economic partner for the countries of Southeast Asia today. “The United States today has the strongest economy in the world, and our consumers are driving demand for your products. In contrast, China’s economy is entering a new normal—a new normal of ever-slower growth” (US Embassy & Consulate in Thailand, 2019).

The United States is indeed traditionally one of the main destinations for ASEAN exports. However, it is too early to speak unequivocally about the ASEAN countries’ strategic orientation toward the American consumer. The steady decline in the U.S. share in regional exports after 2010, accompanied by China’s rapid economic growth, brought the latter to the first position in the list of importers of ASEAN products. Meanwhile, in the post-crisis period, the growth rate of trade with China has slowed down (to 10%–10.5% annually), whereas the American economy’s recovery by the mid-2010s stimulated consumer demand. The orientation of ASEAN exporters toward the U.S. market has become obvious only in recent years: against the lowering pace of exports growth to China (7.6% and 1.1% in 2018 and 2019, respectively), exports to the United States grew by 13.9% and 13.7% during the same years. At the same time, U.S.–China trade tensions change local and international supply chains and provide ASEAN countries with opportunities to replace Chinese goods for the U.S. market (Harding & Tran, 2019) and stimulate ASEAN–U.S. trade. Cambodia, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Thailand are the most dependent on American demand. The United States accounts for 29.7%, 23%, 15.7%, and 12.6% in their export structure, respectively (as of 2019). In turn, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore remain more focused on the Chinese market.

China still holds the leading position in the list of importers from ASEAN: in 2019, the total ASEAN exports to China reached more than US\$202 billion (against US\$184.8 billion to the United States). Nevertheless, if the Chinese economy’s crisis trends intensify in the coming years and the United States keeps a stable demand, the latter has a chance of regaining its lost position.

The vision of the unique role of the United States in the Indo-Pacific and China’s designation as its main political, economic, and military rival shape the content of U.S. foreign policy planning at all levels—strategic, regional, and national.

### One mega-region, different visions

However, almost 3 years after President of the United States’ public statements regarding the Indo-Pacific,

differences persist in the United States' and its partners' approaches to the very concept of the Indo-Pacific region (Nagy, 2019b).

In the eyes of supporters of the liberal paradigm, the realization of this concept is associated with two security challenges: China's alleged desire to dominate both East Asia and beyond; and the gradual decline of U.S.-centered military alliances, which previously formed the backbone of regional security. However, with regard to the first factor, it could be argued that Beijing's actions to expand its naval presence in the Indian Ocean can be explained by its desire to ensure the stability of its own access to key maritime transport arteries.

As for the second factor, we should note that critics of the Indo-Pacific concept see the potential partners of the United States in the region, the "key players" that make up the conditional QUAD (Japan, India, and Australia, alongside the United States itself), as little more than Washington's lackeys. For example, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation Sergey Lavrov announced during the ASEAN Summit in Bangkok in July 2019 that, by promoting the Indo-Pacific format, the United States was trying to "drag India into a confrontation with China," getting "those in Australia and Japan who will agree to anything" on board while at the same time depriving ASEAN of its central role in solving regional security problems (Tarasenko, 2019). Meanwhile, every one of the key players that the United States is counting on certainly has its own interests as well.

## India

India's vision of the Indo-Pacific was first developed by Khurana (2007) and was presented in the context of India–Japan cooperation in the creation of secure sea lines. There is no consensus in the academic literature regarding India's position on the Indo-Pacific concept. On the one hand, research work is overwhelmingly informed by the fear of the "Chinese threat." Experts note the desire of both countries to be the dominant force in the region, which only exacerbates existing contradictions and could lead to military clashes between the two, or at the very least to the potentially dangerous militarization of the region (Banyan, 2012; South Asia Analysis Group, 2011). As China embeds itself into the Indian Ocean's geopolitics, Indian analysts worry about China's "dual-use" South Asian projects." (Singh, 2019). India is also concerned about the blossoming relationship between China and Russia (Gupta, 2017). Swaraj (2017) stresses that, in the context of the growing rivalry between China and India as naval powers, strengthening partnership within the Indo-Pacific QUAD is seen as a strategically important tool to safeguard land and maritime territories; deepen economic and security cooperation in the littoral states; promote collective action to deal with non-traditional security threats; work toward promoting maritime rules and norms (Swaraj, 2017); and ensure the

balance of power in the region (Parmar, 2014; Scott, 2013; Singh, 2011). "This strategy regards India as a potential stabilizing actor on security and economic fronts" (Pitakdumrongkit, 2019, p. 8).

On the contrary, experts stress the "neutrality" of the Indian position, its "tradition of non-alignment" (Pejsova, 2018, p. 2), and desire to continue the constructive dialogue with Russia inside BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) (Denisov & Safranchuk, 2016), which it sees as strategically important. Prasad (2018, p. 137) notes that India "simultaneously values its ties with the BRICS nations and seeks to keep China engaged in the region because of the importance of the Eurasian dimension of their partnership" (Prasad, 2018). Shyam Saran (2017, p. 2) defines strategic autonomy as "the ability to take relatively independent decisions on matters of vital interest. Expanding the scope for such autonomy is the hallmark of a successful foreign policy."

Given the "fluidity" of the current international system and the complex dynamics of relations in the India–U.S.–China triangle, both the general objectives of the Indian diplomacy and New Delhi's response to the Indo-Pacific strategy will include a rapid regrouping of interests and partners, attempts to interact with competing parties to achieve optimal results, and a desire to manage risks and uncertainties effectively. In our view, in the coming years, we will see a further process of rethinking the principle of non-alignment underlying India's independent policy, which is now being implemented in the form of multiple partnerships. New Delhi's interaction with other players will be characterized by the formula "convergence with many but congruence with none" (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2019). Although some convergence between Indian and U.S. approaches in the Indo-Pacific can be expected, this convergence will not be complete. Despite the current state of India–China relations, New Delhi is unlikely to join U.S. plans to contain China in the Pacific.

## Australia

Australia presented its vision of the Indo-Pacific concept in its 2013 Defence White Paper, which argued that "shaping the development of the Indo-Pacific is critical to [the country's] objective of long-term regional security and prosperity" and a "rules-based global order" (Government of Australia, 2013).

Australia's priorities in the ongoing U.S.–China confrontation are to maintain freedom of navigation and manage its growing ties with China, which has allegedly infiltrated Australian domestic politics (Hamilton & Joske, 2018) while building trilateral cooperation alongside its partners and strengthening ties with ASEAN (Government of Australia, 2016). At the same time, Australia remains

committed to deepening security ties with India. In 2017, the Prime Minister of Australia Malcolm Turnbull visited India and in a joint statement declared the two states “partners in the Indo-Pacific” with “a commitment to democratic values, the rule of law, international peace and security, and shared prosperity” (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2017).

## Japan

Tokyo’s stance on the Indo-Pacific concept deserves separate consideration, and we will explain why.

First, the Prime Minister of Japan Shinzo Abe and his team were responsible for the creation of the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2017), most of which was adopted by the Trump administration. What is more, in a definite “win” for the Japanese side, the term “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy” proposed by Tokyo appears throughout the documents produced by the Department of State and the Pentagon.

Second, the main dialogue format of the alliance, known as the “two plus two meetings” (which have been held since the Cold War), has become a “focal point” of the Indo-Pacific concept.

Third, Shinzo Abe, playing an important role in the implementation of American initiatives in the Indo-Pacific, nevertheless sees improving relations with Russia as one of his priority tasks as the Prime Minister of Japan. Not that the Japanese Prime Minister can be considered “pro-Russian,” and he obviously has the interests of his country in mind when dealing with Russia. But Japan’s partners in the West, primarily the American establishment, were supremely disappointed with how it took part in the project to isolate Russia following the Ukrainian crisis, limiting itself to symbolic steps only. We can assume that as one of the main “moderators” of the Indo-Pacific concept, Japan had no interest in adding fuel to its already tense relations with Russia, which are further aggravated by U.S.–Japan security cooperation.

On the contrary, Tokyo has recently started to see certain actions of the United States as a threat to the established world order. Moreover, given the unpredictability of Washington’s political course toward the key players in East Asia, Japan may lay claim to the role of leader when it comes to curbing China’s plans to expand its influence in Asia and Europe. At the same time, Japan is calling for a softer version of the Indo-Pacific concept. Tokyo would prefer infrastructure arrangements and the freedom of navigation to uncompromising actions to contain China in the “Cold War” tradition, which could lead to a confrontation between Russia and China on the one hand and the United States and its allies on the other (Nagy, 2019a). To a large extent, Japan’s economic growth and regional stability in East Asia depend on Tokyo, maintaining cordial relations with Beijing (Nagy, 2019b).

As far as relations between Tokyo and Moscow are concerned, any interaction between Russia and Japan in the infrastructure development of the region will be impossible if the current U.S.-centric model of the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” persists. However, Tokyo continues to act in its own interests, as Japan is more deeply embedded in the political and economic agenda of Southeast Asia. The fact that Japan and ASEAN aligned their approaches to the Indo-Pacific in 2018–2019 is an encouraging sign for Russia. Beijing hardly sees ASEAN’s enduring economic and cultural ties with Japan as a threat, given China’s growing economic clout in the region. At the same time, China believes that the ASEAN’s internal reasons for alignment with Japan in the Indo-Pacific region are not anti-Chinese or pro-American because ASEAN wants to keep its centrality and avoid choosing between Beijing and Washington.

## ASEAN

ASEAN does not make up a part of the so-called Democratic Security Diamond (the United States, Japan, India, and Australia). However, Tokyo sees ASEAN as the geographic “heart” of the Indo-Pacific strategy, which is not surprising, because the ASEAN members enjoy stable economic and cultural ties with Japan and have been acting as Tokyo’s regional partners on security issues in recent times (Yennie-Lindgren, 2019).

In May 2018, the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Singapore Vivian Balakrishnan announced that his country would not be participating in any activities related to the “QUAD” until ASEAN’s central role is clearly enshrined in Japan’s “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy” (Yong, 2018). Similar views have found support among ASEAN member states. In August 2018, for example, representatives of some ASEAN states said that it would be difficult for them to support any “strategy” that is most likely aimed against China. What is more, in 2018, Indonesia suggested that ASEAN develop its own concept on the Indo-Pacific. The proposal became one of the main topics of discussion at the “High Level Dialogue on Indo-Pacific Cooperation” held in March 2019 and attended by the heads of the ministries of foreign affairs of Australia, New Zealand, as well as the deputy ministers of foreign affairs of China, Japan, India, and South Korea, in addition to representatives of the ASEAN countries. The Outlook on the Indo-Pacific was approved at the ASEAN Summit in Bangkok in June 2019 (Fardah, 2019).

Concerned that it was losing its positions in Southeast Asia, Tokyo decided to meet its partners halfway, updating its “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy” to include the principle of ASEAN’s central role in resolving regional security issues. As an aside, it is worth mentioning that Sergey Lavrov talked about the importance of preserving ASEAN’s role in such matters during his 2019 news conference in Bangkok (that we mentioned above). However,

according to one Japanese expert (Koga, 2019), these changes can be viewed more as a short-term fix. For example, the idea of “fundamental rights” can be seen by Southeast Asian countries as a source of risk for one of the basic principles of ASEAN—non-interference in the internal affairs of other member countries, although in reality the Japanese and American interpretations of how to implement this principle in practice differ greatly. Japan insists that fundamental rights refer to the development of international trade based on equal and transparent rules. “Japan has emphasized rule of law at the international level while the United States focuses on both the domestic and international levels” (Koga, 2019).

The close alliance between Washington and Tokyo may prove to be a serious obstacle to the ASEAN countries’ broader involvement in the Indo-Pacific agenda. The fact of the matter is that Southeast Asian countries are far more interested in avoiding being dragged into a “big game” on the side of one of the leading powers, including the United States, than they are, for example, in resisting Beijing in its territorial disputes in the South China Sea.

Washington is far less flexible than Tokyo in its approaches to involving ASEAN in the Indo-Pacific agenda. The Department of State report mentioned earlier asserts the “central” role of ASEAN in shaping the Indo-Pacific architecture. According to Gregory B. Poling, this represents a friendly signal to the countries in Southeast Asia. At the same time, the decision of the Trump administration to send a delegation of low-ranking officials to the East Asia Summit in November 2019 (its worst turnout since the United States joined the forum in 2011) suggests that Washington does not prioritize relations with ASEAN in the same way Tokyo does. The ASEAN countries responded in kind at the annual U.S.–ASEAN Summit, limiting the number of heads of state representing the Association there to three. This indicates that Tokyo, unlike Washington, is prepared to compromise on issues related to the Indo-Pacific (Poling, 2019).

### **China: containing the U.S. containment**

Beijing sees the new American concept from the point of view of the growing confrontation with Washington, including as an attempt on the part of Washington to prevent the implementation of the BRI promoted by China (Huang, 2018; Liu, 2019). The borders of the Indo-Pacific more or less encompass the maritime segment of the Belt and Road project that holds so much promise—the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. Yang Zhendeng (2019) argues that the United States’ geopolitical goal in the post–Cold War era is to control the periphery of the Eurasian continent and prevent the emergence of a country or group of countries in the region that threatens the hegemony of the United States. Chinese experts often counter U.S. assessments of

the development of the Indo-Pacific by listing the advantages of the Chinese model and its plans to develop the region’s infrastructure. For example, according to Meng Qinglong, by proposing a concept of a new type of international relations, promoting the idea of a “community of shared future for mankind” and by putting forward the BRI, China has brought tangible benefits to the countries in the Indo-Pacific region (Meng, 2018).

At the same time, experts note that China does not see itself as belonging to the Indo-Pacific region and prefers not to use the American term in its official documents (He and Li, 2020). Evidently, the Chinese side sees any official mention of the term “Indo-Pacific,” which forms the core of the communication strategy and practical diplomacy of the United States in the region, as potentially damaging to China’s interests in terms of expanding its influence and strengthening its own discursive power. It is no coincidence that Chinese leaders can often be heard questioning how long the United States can keep up its plans and how feasible they are in practice. At the same time, the Chinese side has embraced the American model of arguing and often copies it, “mirroring” Washington’s words whenever mention is made of the rise of authoritarianism—the bugbear that the concept of a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” intends to fight—by talking about the creation of blocs and whipping up a Cold War mentality.

Speaking in March 2018 about how China views the Indo-Pacific strategy, Foreign Minister of the People’s Republic of China Wang Yi sounded like a wise old Sage from the Eastern tradition: “It seems there is never a shortage of headline-grabbing ideas. They are like the sea foam in the Pacific or Indian Ocean: they may get some attention, but soon will dissipate.” In the same speech, he noted that “stoking a new Cold War is out of sync with the times and inciting block confrontation will find no market” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People’s Republic of China, 2018).

As Hu Bo (2019) notes, the “Chinese threat” underlies the United States’ actions and its adoption of the Indo-Pacific strategy. At the same time, China no doubt understands that looking at the Indo-Pacific, not as a narrative but as a kind of structure headed by Washington within which the United States gives commands and its allies carry them out, is too simplistic.

Chinese scholars stress that the concept of a single region with a common strategic vision (Song Wei uses the term “Indo-Pacific system;” Song, 2018) has a real basis in the form of strengthening trade and economic ties that put the issue of closer integration on the agenda. The growing economic, political, and social ties in the Indo-Pacific inevitably lead to the emergence of new problems in terms of regional governance. This creates the need to develop a political architecture with a suitable governance system. As Song Wei notes, two versions of this system’s strategic foundation can be built—an inclusive model of cooperation (tackling problems faced by all the countries in the region)

and a model aimed at containing China (a confrontational system of alliances). Going against the American approach, which is based on the “coordination of big powers” to the exclusion of China, Song Wei sees promise in the creation of a “strong regional system” within the Indo-Pacific that operates on the principle of openness and non-exclusiveness. An example of this kind of mechanism is the East Asia Summit, which encompasses the United States, Russia, China, Japan, India, Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, and ASEAN (Song, 2018).

There are some serious differences among those who have adopted, to one degree or another, the American model of the Indo-Pacific in terms of their views on the relative proportions of its military and economic components, its geopolitical and geographical contours, and so on. For example, Tokyo believes that the Indo-Pacific should include East Africa, while Canberra is not prepared to move the border that far west. These disagreements notwithstanding, there is no denying that there is a definite anti-Chinese undertone to this approach. However, any issues that the states involved in the creation of this Indo-Pacific concept may have with China are of an individual nature and are often limited to rather narrow goals, so it would seem that it is somewhat premature to start talking about a united anti-Beijing front. This factor determines the content of the discussion about whether the American concept of the Indo-Pacific poses a direct threat to China’s security.

Even though relations between Beijing and New Delhi are weighed down by territorial disputes and the struggle for regional leadership (Denisov, Safranchuk, & Bochkov, 2020), Chinese scholars are not convinced that India will be all in when it comes to containing China, noting that while the United States and India agree to some extent regarding the content and goals of the Indo-Pacific strategy, as well as their visions of what the strategy should be and their attitudes toward it, there are also obvious differences, and the parties expect very different things from each other (Meng, 2018).

As we mentioned earlier, the United States has based its entire plan on the so-called “QUAD” of the United States, Japan, Australia, and India as the key players in the Indo-Pacific concept. And these countries are counting on cooperation with ASEAN nations, primarily the key “moderators” of the ASEAN agenda that are involved in one way or another in a dispute with China (e.g., Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam), to implement the concept. However, their united position versus China is questionable because these nations also have territorial disputes between themselves (Vietnam vs. the Philippines and Vietnam vs. Indonesia). At the same time, Chinese experts have noted that the U.S.–Japan Security Alliance forms the lynchpin of the QUAD, while India and Australia are left somewhat on the outside. According to Song Wei, there is still no unified alliance against China in the Indo-Pacific (Song, 2018). Of course, given the likelihood that U.S.–China relations will

continue to deteriorate and the fact that the United States could exert pressure on its partners in the region, we cannot rule out the possibility that such an alliance may appear, or that new challenges may arise if those countries that are wavering currently (India and Australia) decide to take an adversarial position toward China.

As far as the United States is concerned, China poses a comprehensive and multifaceted threat, so it must do the same. The pillars of the U.S. strategy in the Indo-Pacific are economic and trade competition, and geopolitical maneuvers (Hu, 2019).

China has recently seen signs that the United States is looking at the economic components as a key element of its Indo-Pacific concept (Qian, 2020). This much is evident from the practical steps taken by the American side, particularly the establishment of the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (USIDFC) in 2018. What is more, the announcement was made during the Indo-Pacific Business Forum in Bangkok in November 2019 that the American Overseas Private Investment Corporation had, in conjunction with the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Japan Bank for International Cooperation, established the Blue Dot Network (BDN). This multilevel initiative helps government agencies, the private sector, and nongovernmental organizations create high-quality infrastructure on the principles of openness and inclusivity. The BDN will evaluate and certify prospective infrastructure projects—primarily in the Indo-Pacific, but also beyond its borders—in terms of compliance with the Western (and primarily American) principles and standards of an open market, transparency and financial stability (Gulevich, 2019).

However, the “QUAD” has thus far been unable to offer anything more substantive than looking for an alternative to the BRI, which may point to the reactive nature of the Indo-Pacific concept in general. A year after its creation, the BDN only looks like a vision of global infrastructure development standards, with the auditing process yet to really deserve to be the gold standard for public and private projects. On its own, although a critical attitude toward Chinese economic expansion was embedded in its conception, BDN cannot be a competitor to the BRI, where China acts as a provider of public goods, not as an auditor. That notwithstanding, China will continue to keep an eye on how the BDN is progressing. As Gu Bin (2020) has pointed out, the best way to ensure the high-quality development of the BRI is to draw up a system of standards that can then be implemented in practice.

Chinese researchers pay special attention to ASEAN’s role in the Indo-Pacific strategy, given that the association is crucial to the implementation of the BRI. As Zhang Jie (2019) has pointed out, the ASEAN countries are deeply skeptical of the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy and have shown limited support for it. Instead, they have tried to preserve their unity by putting forward their own vision of the

Indo-Pacific region (Zhang, 2019). At the same time, Zhang Jie is among a number of experts (Gong, 2020; Yang, 2020) who have stressed that security and mutual trust are the keys to success for the Chinese initiative among the ASEAN countries.

We can thus say that the advancement of the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy caused China to rethink the balance of elements of rivalry and cooperation in its relations with the United States, but it also in a sense forced Beijing to reassess its tactical objectives and strategic goals in the region. By artfully building relations with leading players, Beijing is addressing its main objective, which is to prevent the formation of a large alliance that wants to curb China's growth. Although objections to hard and soft alliances are often explained by Beijing's opposition to the Cold War mentality, with the advent of Xi Jinping the motivation for Chinese behavior changed significantly. Although in the past China felt that it was likely to lose because of the hegemonic order, now that it has moved from being a globalized power to a globalizing one (Denisov, Kazantsev, Lukyanov, & Safranchuk, 2019), Beijing needs the freedom of maneuver in Eurasia that any alliance will hold back.

In organizing the geopolitical space in Eurasia, China is in principle—opposed to the formation of any blocs—economic or even more so military. Zhao Huasheng (2020) considers the prospect of such a bloc as a result of the Indo-Pacific Strategy, though he prefers to use the term “soft system.”

According to Zhao, the term “soft system” refers to a form between a system and a process. It is both Cold War and post-Cold War in nature, with some attributes of the Cold War period and some characteristics of the post-Cold War period. “The ‘soft systems’ compete with each other as defined competitors or adversaries, but not in open hostility and confrontation similar to that of the cold war” (Zhao, 2020). However, even under this scenario, the evolution of the Indo-Pacific process toward “soft bloc” seems undesirable for China. It does not see itself as part of the process and firmly opposes any geopolitical structures that may develop outside of Chinese control.

### **Russia's pivot to Asia and the Indo-Pacific geopolitics**

Until recently, Russia was not exactly welcoming of the idea of the Indo-Pacific as a new geopolitical construct to replace the established concept of the Asia-Pacific. Importantly, this approach is expressed not only by the President (Administration of the President of the Russian Federation, 2019) and the Minister of Foreign Affairs (this much was evident from the interview with Sergey Lavrov mentioned above) but also by the Minister of Defence. Speaking at the plenary session of the Beijing Xiangshan Forum in October 2019, Minister of Defence of the Russian Federation Sergey Shoigu commented that

the only way to ensure security in the Asia-Pacific is to take the interests of all the players in the region into account. We believe that the artificial expansion of the sphere of cooperation to the so-called Indo-Pacific region is aimed at creating dividing lines, creating tension among Asia-Pacific countries, and, ultimately, at restraining regional development.

He then added that “similar methods have already been worked out in Europe, Africa, and the Middle East” (Interfax, 2019). Earlier, Shoigu's deputy, Colonel General Alexander Fomin, had this to say at the International Conference on Security in Asia held in Singapore:

Some international players are attempting, under the guise of new regional configurations, to promote the building of military and political blocs, so-called “Indo-Pacific strategies.” Their concept of a “free and open Indo-Pacific” is being introduced artificially and is based on the geopolitical interests of certain countries. (RIA Novosti, 2019)

There are many reasons for Russia to unwelcome the Indo-Pacific. Even though Russia's views on issues of military security are more “continental” in nature and it is far more concerned about Western initiatives to expand North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) than it is about the allied relations between the United States and Japan or South Korea, Moscow can hardly ignore the military component of the Indo-Pacific (the “QUAD”), which may eventually develop into a sort of “Asian NATO.” Furthermore, Russia is committed to building a polycentric world order, and thus resists alike American unilateralism and U.S.-centric geopolitical alliances. The logic of the strategic partnership between Russia and China is also an essential factor influencing Russia's stance on the Indo-Pacific concept: Russia resists the U.S.-led effort to build a broad anti-China alliance, which would undermine this partner of Russia.

However, besides broad geopolitical considerations mentioned above, Russia has to accommodate its position toward the Indo-Pacific with a strengthening geo-economic component of its foreign policy, represented by the Eurasian integration and the Greater Eurasian partnership.

The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) was founded on the views heavily influenced by the effects of the global economic crisis in 2007–2008. The West, traditionally perceived as the driver of global development, suddenly became the source of global crisis. Globalization looked undermined and strategic rebalancing was in progress. Traditional leaders were in relative decline, whereas new ones were on the rise. The most ambitious post-Soviet space leaders, namely Putin and Nazarbaev, wanted to be part of this strategic shift. They presented a vision of establishing a regional union. Putin wrote, “This union will allow us not merely to fit into the global economy and trade, but truly participate in decision-making on global rules and frameworks for the future” (Putin, 2011). Nazarbaev added that

the new union had “every chance to become an integral part of the new world architecture” (Nazarbaev, 2011). Post-Soviet integration (an attempt to build coalition for merely better fitting into globalization supervised by others) evolved into Eurasian integration, which was to create a strong regional center of development to be one of the stakeholders in the new world order (Safranchuk 2018, 2019). Putin claimed that in the post-crisis reality solutions for global problems should come from “the bottom”: solutions should first be tried “inside established regional structures—the EU, NAFTA, APEC, ASEAN and others, and only then (taken on a global level) through a dialogue between such structures” (Putin, 2011). This presents globalization as a derivative of regional integrations: countries, in particular middle powers and smaller, can participate in globalization more effectively through regional integrations rather than individually. Within this approach, Putin and Nazarbaev sought to reconcile two aims—protectionism (which was inherent to facilitate growth in non-resource sectors and re-industrialization) and advancement of their global standing. In the initial presentation of the Eurasian integration vision by Putin and Nazarbaev, these two ends well fitted together, at least rhetorically.

While on the way to implement this vision—a customs union came together in 2010, later it was extended to become common economic space, and in 2015 the EAEU was established—Russia encountered geopolitical tensions. After the exchange of sanctions and countersanction with the West in 2014 in the aftermath of the Ukrainian crisis, Russia got more economically isolated. Some in Russia cherished this development and argued for further moves in this direction by enforcing protectionist elements up to turning them into isolation, a sort of closed regionalization. However, the official Russian decision-making quickly denied this perspective, turning to a more open approach. Russia shifted to building something more global above the EAEU, introducing a number of “EAEU plus” venues (with Vietnam, Iran, Israel, etc.) and the Greater Eurasian Partnership.

The uniqueness of the EAEU lies in Russia’s only member country that has access to the sea. Russia’s Central Asian partners in the EAEU make up one of the largest groups of landlocked countries in the world (the so-called “inaccessible region”; Lissovlik, 2017). On the one hand, it means that land transportation dominates in the EAEU and the bloc cannot be directly affected by the Indo-Pacific activities. On the contrary, Russia needs to provide its partners within the regional integration access to maritime routes, connecting them to global economy. Russia’s pivot to Asia within the Greater Eurasia vision is a viable option for its EAEU partners to connect to the Asian part of the global economy. To make Eurasian integration a success, Russia needs to reconcile protectionism with participation in globalization. The EAEU as a purely isolationistic bloc is hardly interesting to any of its members and, thus, is

doomed to collapse. The Eurasian integration and the Greater Eurasia are closely interconnected strategic visions, which together sought to maintain an economically integrated entity in Eurasia and get it connected to the global economy, in particular its Asian part while politically motivated sanctions and countersanctions curb connections between Russia and the West. In broader terms, Russia does not want to face in Asia realities of economic and political opportunities being compromised by geopolitical arrangements disciplined by the United States.

Hence, for now the concern is strong that the U.S. conceptualization of an Indo-Pacific bloc might not only take on an anti-Chinese character but also eventually undermine Russia’s plans for cooperation in the Eurasian region (Lukin & Torkunov, 2020). However, some Russian experts argue that because India’s, Japan’s, and other regional interpretation of the Indo-Pacific have important specifics, Russia should lessen its concerns over the America-centrism of the Indo-Pacific (Skosyrev, 2019).

Anton Tsvetov (Tsvetov, 2018) believes that, when it comes to containing China, the role of regional and middle powers will have a twofold effect on Russia’s interests. On the one hand, if India becomes actively involved in the work of the “QUAD,” then relations with Russia will inevitably diminish to the empty rhetoric and reference to the “privileged” partnership between the two states. On the other hand, shifting part of the responsibility for regional affairs onto Tokyo will increase Japan’s strategic autonomy, opening new opportunities for interaction with Russia in the long term.

According to Brown (2019), even limited options for cooperation between Russia and Japan within the framework of the Japanese version of the Indo-Pacific concept can bring Russia economic benefits, in particular by attracting more Japanese investments (especially in the Russian Far East). This in turn, Brown (2019) says, could contribute to the development of Vladivostok as a center of international trade and the development of the Trans-Siberian Railway as a trade route between Asia and Europe.

The underlying problem for Russia in Asia is that regional countries react to the growingly evident transformation of China’s economic rise into geopolitical might and ambition by strengthening relations with the United States. Moreover, strategic partnership between Russia and China even further pushes Asian countries toward the United States (very much like the confrontation with the West pushes Russia toward China). Individually, Asian countries are inherently inviting U.S. military-security engagement in Asia. This is not a fundamentally new problem for Russia, but in recent years it has substantially tightened. To ease this problem, Russia has traditionally spoken in favor of advancing regional cooperation based on the ASEAN. Arguably, Russia hoped that Asia would later move in the direction of building a kind of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)-like—inclusive and multi-dimensional—model of

regional cooperation (something the OSCE had envisioned but failed to implement in Europe after the end of the Cold War). With the hard push for the geopolitical Indo-Pacific concept by the Trump administration, Asia may move in a very different direction, at the worst extreme toward a NATO-like regional arrangement. This development is unwelcomed by Russia, but it is also a concern for many Asian countries: by large, emerging powers share and promote the goal to reconcile development and security needs rather than sacrifice one for another.

The problem of Russia's attitude to the Indo-Pacific concept was brought up during Vladimir Putin's Q&A session at the 16th Annual Meeting of the Valdai Discussion Club in October 2019. When asked about the "Japanese concept of a free and open Indo-Pacific strategy" put forward by the Prime Minister of Japan Shinzo Abe, the Russian President stated that it would make sense to "pool the efforts of the already established agencies, organizations, and even concepts" aimed at creating a large Eurasian partnership. It is noteworthy that Putin effectively put the "Indo-Pacific development strategy" on a par with the SCO. We can thus gauge from Putin's words that Russia is not categorically against building a new regional architecture, provided that this architecture is not closed and "bloc-based." A networked regional structure with ASEAN at the center would certainly be acceptable for Russia (Administration of the President of the Russian Federation, 2019).

According to Tsvetov (2018), neither the weakening of multilateral mechanisms around ASEAN nor the development of a system of "smart containment" of China fit well into the Russian initiative to create a multilateral architecture of equal and indivisible security in the Asia-Pacific, and this presents a serious challenge for Moscow. Russia's main competitive advantages are the potential of its diplomacy, its experience of working in multilateral institutions, and its relative detachment from a number of the region's problems (Tsvetov, 2018).

The good news for Russia is that many Asian countries are interested in access to the continental parts of Eurasia, most easily achievable through cooperation with Russia and the EAEU, and they do not want to sacrifice this mostly economic interest for the sake of security cooperation with the United States. As discussed in earlier sections of this article, Asian countries have regional interpretations, overall less geopolitical, of their cooperation with the United States and the Indo-Pacific. The further development of the Russia's position toward the Indo-Pacific will very much be determined which—American-centered or regional—interpretations of the concept will prevail.

## Conclusion

American diplomacy in Asia hinges on the rapid creation of a "networked region." That is, its focus is on maintaining

alliances and expanding its network of partner relations, which, as U.S. strategic planning documents point out, provides "a durable, asymmetric strategic advantage that no competitor or rival can match" (Mattis, 2018). The United States' main adversary is China, whose economic clout is growing despite the ongoing fears of a number of countries about the rise of Beijing.

Now Russia's and China's critical perceptions of the Indo-Pacific derive from the general positions they share in world politics—to resist the U.S. quest for global dominance and, at the same time, to downplay the confrontational trend of great power competition. Russia and China clearly unwelcome the Indo-Pacific as a new geopolitical construct with military component. However, the future of Russian and Chinese positions will be determined by the development of this construct. One may foresee the two countries' positions being further converged in opposition to the Indo-Pacific or, on the contrary, substantially diverging.

Focusing on confrontation with China, the Trump administration sees the Indo-Pacific as the prototype of an America-centric defensive alliance, a regional geopolitical bloc. If this trend sustains in the future and matures, regional powers may need to compromise their economic interests unrelated to the United States for the sake of security cooperation with the United States. This is the sacrifice they will definitely dislike, thus seeking to avoid or delay it, but may still be unable to reconcile security and economic priorities. Then, Russia and China are likely to stay together in more active opposition to the Indo-Pacific. In this case, the perception, expressed now by some Chinese experts, of the Greater Eurasia process as a pole in new world bipolarity will materialize (though internal solidity of this pole is likely to remain a subject of debate). Russia and China will extend their military cooperation. However, the scenario of creating a formal military alliance will be left as a last resort, if their security is simultaneously under serious and direct threat from the United States and its allies (Lukin & Kashin, 2019).

However, if regional interpretations of the Indo-Pacific prevail, less geopolitical and confrontational, Russia's and China's reactions can be far less, if at all, concerted. As a globalizing power, China prefers to deal with individual countries rather than regional organizations. Thus, it will be inclined to unwelcome, even if not openly demonstrating this, any substantial regional consolidation. In its turn, Russia is far more welcoming to regional formats as elements of a new type of globalization. Without intense geopolitical competition in Asia, Russia will tend to use the Greater Eurasia as an instrument of reaching out to Asian individual countries and regional groups. Russia sees ASEAN as the preferable Asian regional format. However, if countries consolidate within the Indo-Pacific to raise their voices rather than merely serve the geopolitical purposes of the United States, this may be acceptable to Russia.

In this case, Russia will look for ways to engage with the Indo-Pacific.

It is important to note that many countries that are worried about the rise of China are by no means “free” and “democratic.” What is more, the small and medium-sized powers in the region do not want to see a new Cold War emerge between China and the United States and would rather remain neutral in such a conflict than be forced to choose sides. In conclusion, it would be fair to say that Russia and China’s responses to the concept of a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” moving forward will depend on the actions of the United States, as well as on the behavior of other regional actors.

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