



MAKING THE INDO-PACIFIC REAL

BY BRAD GLOSSERMAN

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Policymakers and analysts throughout the region are struggling to understand the meaning of the phrase “Indo-Pacific.” Embraced by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson in October, the term has become an organizing principle for US foreign policy in the Trump administration. While there has been applause for adopting the term, there remains considerable confusion about its content. No one, in the US or in Japan, can explain how the concept differs from predecessors or what it will mean in practice. That void must be filled, but it will take more than speeches and papers to make “the Indo-Pacific” a meaningful concept: Actions will speak louder than words.

The “Indo-Pacific” became the Trump administration’s operative unit of US foreign policy analysis after Tillerson used it (19 times no less) in an October 2017 [speech](#) at CSIS. He observed that “The Pacific and the Indian Oceans have linked our nations for centuries.... As we look to the next 100 years, it is vital that the Indo-Pacific, a region so central to our shared history, continued to be free and open.” The occasion – a speech hosted by the think tank’s India Chair – and its use were intended to signal an expansion of the more traditional Asia-Pacific formulation to one that would include India. It was quickly [adopted](#) by the Trump administration and identified as their preferred strategic referent. During his November 2017 Asia tour, President Trump made frequent reference to the term, although he sometimes spoke of the “Indo-Asia-Pacific.”

In fact, the phrase has an older provenance. One [analysis](#) credits Indian naval officer Gurpreet Khurana with the first reference in a 2007 paper, although Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo advanced the concept (without using the precise term) during his first term in office (2006-7) when he [called](#) for cooperation with India as part of a “Democratic Security Diamond” that included Japan, India, the US and Australia. US reference to a “free and open Indo-Pacific” uses Abe’s logic and sharpens the language. By 2013, Australian analyst Rory Medcalf could [argue](#) that “Asian geopolitics is abuzz with talk of the ‘Indo-Pacific.’” He noted that the phrase had been “thoroughly inducted into the U.S. rhetorical armory,” highlighting mentions by Secretaries of State

Hillary Clinton and John Kerry, as well as its use by Pacific Command. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has used it since 2012, Australia officially embraced the term in its 2013 Defense White Paper, and Southeast Asian leaders have also [endorsed](#) the concept.

Despite that history, the concept remains amorphous. It defines a geographic space – the Indian and Pacific Oceans and the countries on their littorals – and suggests that that makes those governments logical diplomatic and security partners. Beyond geography, protagonists assert an alignment of countries that share values – and, by implication, excludes those that do not. Read: China.

It is revealing that the Trump administration adopted the Indo-Pacific terminology just before it produced a new *National Security Strategy* (NSS) that argues that “great power competition” is the defining feature of the strategic landscape. The NSS [identifies](#) China and Russia as “revisionist powers” that are “actively competing against the US and its allies.” Specifically, “China seeks to displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region, expand the reaches of its state-driven economic model, and reorder the region in its favor.” While acknowledging a desire to cooperate with Beijing, the NSS devotes far more space to the threats China poses and the need for cooperation among the US, its allies and partners, because “Chinese dominance risks diminishing the sovereignty of many states in the Indo-Pacific.” Tellingly, every reference to India in the NSS (save two) is in the context of security cooperation.

The content of that cooperation, over a decade after it was first articulated, remains undefined. While there are repeated references to an “Indo-Pacific strategy,” there is little more than a set of ideas and nostrums. Japan has provided the most detail, but the Foreign Ministry has just a one-page [powerpoint slide](#) and speeches that repeat key points from “A Confluence of Two Seas,” Abe’s seminal August 2007 speech to the Indian Parliament. In Washington and Tokyo, officials and analysts acknowledge the need to fill in details, but the process has been slow. The traditional balance of power among allies and partners suggests that Washington will lead this process, but given the many issues that the Trump administration faces, its continuing shortage of Asia personnel, and Japan’s role in articulating the Indo-

Pacific concept, Tokyo has an opportunity to direct this effort.

As strategists and planners take up that assignment, here are some guiding principles.

First, it must be *coherent*. It should be a real strategy, rather than a mere outline or talking points. The document should articulate the purpose of the strategy, guiding principles, components – both broadly defined and specific ways they can be implemented – and priorities. It should come from the highest levels of each government – the White House, the Kantei, etc – and it should take a whole of government approach, incorporating and deploying all the tools of national power.

Ideally, participants in the current Indo-Pacific conversation – the US, Japan, Australia and India – will agree on principles, priorities and policies. But they should avoid confusing the Quad with the Indo-Pacific community. The Indo-Pacific construct should be inclusive. Any country or organization willing to endorse the principles should be a partner in the Indo-Pacific project. If principals are committed to the concept, they could launch an “Indo-Pacific caucus” that would meet on the sidelines (and in anticipation of) major international meetings, such as the G20.

Second, it should be *comprehensive*. Thus far, much of the conversation about the Indo-Pacific has focused on its military dimension. That is not enough. A military dimension will be important – given the concept’s origins, maritime domain awareness should be a central theme along with SLOC security and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) – but equal attention should be given to normative and diplomatic elements.

A critical focus of this effort will be economic statecraft. While great power competition has returned, that locus of that struggle is not primarily military; the economic dimension may well be determinative. Countries throughout the Indo-Pacific are looking for help developing their economies and building regional markets. Japan and the US, working with international financial institutions, should be leading this effort. This logic animates the [proposal](#) for a US-Japan-Australia-India “high quality infrastructure initiative” – an excellent first step but success will depend on governments actually providing funds.

Economic statecraft should be complemented by diplomatic initiatives that set norms and standards for regional interaction across a range of fields. These countries should establish rules that define regional interactions. This tracks Prime Minister Abe’s insistence that his country – like other governments that consider themselves part of an Indo-Pacific community – should be a “rule maker, not a rule taker.”

Third, the strategy must be *consistent* – it must be implemented in a visible way. There must be evidence that governments (especially the one in Washington) are prioritizing the Indo-Pacific in budgets, staffing and attention. The rhetoric of the rebalance was never matched by operations of the US government. Other regions commanded more attention, resources and billets than did the Asia Pacific. Expertise and analysis was focused elsewhere. This will be a challenge for the US, given its global interests and the priority traditionally assigned to other regions. Still, if the concept is to have meaning and significance, habits must be broken.

Finally, the strategy should focus on *connectivity*. The basis of the Indo-Pacific community is the connection between two historically separate bodies of water. Diplomatic and economic initiatives should advance the linking of countries and communities; military efforts should be articulated as ways to safeguard those connections.

It is vitally important that Tokyo, Washington and their Indo-Pacific partners take ownership of this concept, define it, and give it real meaning. If they don’t, others will do it for them. Authorship is ownership and much rides on these countries defining the contours and the content of the Indo-Pacific.

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