

REGIONS AND ITS CONTESTATIONS

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The first plenary session of the Asia-Pacific roundtable, titled Asia Pacific vs. Indo Pacific: rationale, contestation and implications brought into light two fundamental questions of what a region is and why we are experiencing a shift in the terms.

To begin, are regions value-free or value-laden? Dr. Raja Mohan makes the argument that regions are continuously undergoing construction and deconstruction, reflecting changes in circumstance. He further argues that, resistance to the term 'Indo Pacific' is odd, as the term does not inherently oppose any other regional construct. Rather, the term 'Indo Pacific' describes the growing integration of a specific boundary of states. In fact, what is described as the Indo Pacific is not even a new concept. Dr. Mohan refers to this as the "restoration of old geographic descriptions, not a reinvention of new geography." This point is made with reference to the fact that aspirations to connect the Pacific and Indian Oceans have long existed. Even China today aspires to achieve to connect the two Oceans through its Belt and Road Initiative.

The idea that regions are social constructs is agreeable, but it is arguable whether they are merely categorizations that are devoid of value judgement. For example, the phrase 'Free and open Indo Pacific' suggests that the Indo Pacific espouses certain values vis-à-vis other regional constructs which espouse contrary, or at least, conflicting ideals. Also, the hyphenated phrase Indo-Pacific, compared to the non-hyphenated Indo Pacific or slashed Indo/Pacific, hints at the conjoining of two strategically distinct regions, as well as a maritime-focused outlook. In this line of thought, that China resists the idea of an Indo

Pacific construct is not odd at all. On the contrary, it is a natural reaction to a phrase that carries value-laden connotations.

Related to the above point, if regions are indeed social constructions, who is doing the constructing? Early mention of the Indo Pacific construct can be found in Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's speech to the Indian Parliament in 2007. The speech, titled, Confluence of the Two Seas, highlighted Japan's aspirations to promote an open and transparent Indo-Pacific zone. In Abe's second inauguration, the Indo Pacific concept emerged in the Security Diamond strategy. However, more recently, the Indo Pacific construct has come to represent Japan's regional vision, and not regional strategy. While a vision is an aspirational guide to help accomplish a long-term plan, a strategy denotes intent to employ political, economic, and military resources to achieve a specific end goal, with a clear success or failure outcome. The shift from strategy to vision is noteworthy, reflecting Japan's sensitive position between China and the United States. Dr. Takahara's presentation about how China's BRI and Japan's FOIP can complement each other is an optimistic outlook, but Japan will need to balance this with sensitivity towards its alliance with the US. For example, Japan will need to be vocal when China's BRI and Japan's FOIP face a fundamental clash over values (free trade, accountability, transparency, etc.).

For the United States, the Indo Pacific concept reflects a clear United States strategy towards the region. Mr. Elbridge Colby emphasized that while the US is not trying to seek dominance in the region or coerce regime change in China, it seeks to create positions of strength as to diminish China's ability to coerce the region's states. The message was clear: The United States is not asking countries, for example, in Southeast Asia to choose between China and the United States. However, it does want to make the region more resilient against China's regional hegemonic goals. While US activities in the region, such as aiding infrastructure building in Southeast Asia, and carrying out freedom of navigation operations, are not targeted at China per se, it is

understandable why China may think it is. This gap in perception calls for greater communication between the two states, focusing on areas of convergence, rather than divergence. Furthermore, as two architects of the Indo Pacific construct, the United States and Japan need to cooperate closely, with the support of other countries such as South Korea and ASEAN member states, on how to make it a durable construct. For example, what happens when Japan's vision clashes with United States strategy?

To conclude, the plenary session highlighted the gap in view held by the United States, China, and to a lesser extent, Japan, regarding the 'Indo Pacific.' One could even make the observation that this message set the tone of the entire Asia Pacific Roundtable conference. Specifically, rather than seeking ways to bridge the gap, discussions throughout the entire conference focused on areas of contestation between the United States and China in the region. As the world enters a more multipolar order, the importance of regions will naturally increase. Thus, at least in the foreseeable future, regions and its contestations will become a recurring concern for scholars and practitioners of international relations.

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