

EURASIAN FUTURES

Two Belts, Two Roads

BRUNO MAÇÃES

The emergence of the Indo-Pacific concept shows how our mental maps are being redrawn in Asia—with geopolitical implications that are only beginning to come into view.

The recent National Defense Strategy of the United States opens by describing a strategic environment of growing competition with revisionist powers. Revealingly, the first example is how China is using its military and economic power to coerce neighboring countries to reorder the “Indo-Pacific region” to its advantage. China, it adds, is pursuing “Indo-Pacific hegemony.” Later the document stresses the capacity to deploy military force in three key regions. Two of them are, unsurprisingly, Europe and the Middle East. The third—and in fact the first one mentioned in this context—is the Indo-Pacific.

Our mental maps are being redrawn. One of the most striking examples of this process is the emergence of a new concept: the “Indo-Pacific.” Changes in mental maps are arguably the great disruptors in the history of world politics. They influence how actors perceive political reality, the way they plan and act, even the way they come to understand cooperation and conflict, and the precise nature of threats.

The first thing to notice about the term Indo-Pacific is that it signals an extension, an enlargement of the orbit within which actors operate. As often in the history of geopolitics, the concept was originally employed by biologists who were aware that marine life in the Pacific and Indian oceans formed a single continuum, and who saw borders as an obstacle to scientific work. Geopolitical thinkers have slowly come around to the same conclusion. Can political and economic questions be addressed within the confines of a narrow definition of the Western Pacific or the Indian Ocean? Or should we attempt to combine the two areas in a

larger geopolitical unit? The answer should not be taken for granted, but many recent developments point towards the need to think in terms of larger and larger units. And these larger units are not abstractions but practical considerations for the actors involved.

What first and foremost gives force to the concept of Indo-Pacific is the expanding role of China and India on the global stage. Seen from the traditional centers of political power in Europe and North America, it is still tempting to think of China as an East Asian nation, and of India as a South Asian nation, but in reality, this is an increasingly meaningless distinction.

For two decades, China has been extending its influence and activities into the Indian Ocean. It has invested in ports in Sri Lanka and Pakistan, sent its submarines across the Malacca Strait with increasing frequency and even—in the most dramatic instance of this trend—opened its first overseas military base in Djibouti at the other end of the Indian Ocean. More recently, this expansive strategy has been given an official name: the Maritime Silk Road, a complex of infrastructure and economic projects spanning the region from the Chinese to the African coasts, onwards to the Suez, with its final destinations at Greece and Turkey.

India has followed suit, albeit a bit more slowly, reflecting the historical lag in development of the two countries. India started to realize that, with China increasingly present in its own backyard, perhaps the inverse movement had become necessary. At first blush, this may have looked like a pure power play—a means of preventing China from abusing its newly acquired presence in the Indian Ocean by developing corresponding leverage points in the Western Pacific. But in truth, the decision to do so was always inevitable, and merely reproduced longstanding dynamics simmering along the countries' lengthy land borders in their neighboring maritime spaces.

That one of the great civilizational borders existing today is being slowly eroded should not be underplayed. Consider how momentous a perceptual transformation would be realized if we started thinking of Europe and the Middle East as a single unit. It is a process of that magnitude that we are watching manifest itself all along the Asian littoral arc, as the border between East and South Asia—a border which has in the past stopped whole armies in their tracks—is being

questioned, doubted, and perhaps, in the end, forgotten. The emergence of the Indo-Pacific represents a key moment—perhaps *the* key moment—in the wider historical process of Eurasian integration.

To a considerable extent, sharp divides between the regions in question have their root in European colonialism, originating either from the competition for territory and spheres of influence between rival European powers, or from administrative expediency to organize territories in separate units. Often these divisions were superimposed on older and more permanent racial or religious divides. In some cases, European colonial powers did much to reinforce them, and in others, they created them out of whole cloth. Different regions in Asia were connected to Europe—the center—in such a formalized way that relations between them never were directly established. Instead, everything passed through the colonial center, which worked as a hub assigning and distributing culture, ideas, and money. The hub-and-spoke model was the original organizing principle of the system. The borders existed, but they mattered most to the European powers in charge of the whole.

At the beginning of the 20th century, as the age of European empires seemed to be coming to an end, a number of visionary thinkers like Mackinder and Mahan started to ponder the possibility of a Eurasian supercontinent from which these divisions had been removed. In some ways, they were ahead of their time. A new age of divisions, ideological rather than cultural or political, would soon follow—a century of spasms triggered by the Europeans' halting retreat and the lunge of an entire world into modernity.

Today, we have returned to the question of Eurasia with renewed vigor. India and China are outgrowing their historical boundaries. Civilizational borders are more fluid and fragile than we thought, and the old order is receding. The process is much further along in the former peripheries in East, Southeast, and South Asia—where borders between countries were less central to the system—than along the Europe-Asia frontier. As all these distinctions dissolve, a new concept of Eurasia rises. And the Indo-Pacific is the central theater where a new order is being rehearsed. That the United States has finally discovered the Indo-Pacific means that a new geopolitical reality is upon us.

There is a page in K.M. Panikkar's *India and the Indian Ocean*, published in 1945, where the great strategic thinker seems to discover the Indo-Pacific. He notes that the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean had dramatically changed since the 19th century. In an earlier time, it represented nothing more than a conduit to the Atlantic and, after the Suez Canal was built, the Mediterranean too.

Japan's conquest of Singapore and the Bay of Bengal changed everything. It showed that India could be dominated from the east. Japan's ultimate defeat did not change India's new calculus. A rising China would one day grow to be a much more formidable competitor than Japan could ever have hoped to be. The strategic fulcrum shifted to the geography connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

Consider trade and economic development. We have grown so used to thinking of India and China as the two economic giants in Asia that we often tend to overlook a third pole, which, as a pivot, may turn out to be just as significant: Southeast Asia. Both India and China are discovering that in a world of deepening economic integration and transnational value chains, their prosperity is closely linked to the fate of Southeast Asia, where opportunities for trade, infrastructure investment, and outsourcing abound. India, in any case, can't cede ground there to China, if it hopes to keep up. There are no other options open to it. To its west, it faces a stagnant and turbulent Middle East; beyond that, mature European economies. By turning east, it finds ample opportunities for investment and trade with Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, and the Philippines.

A related issue is control over the physical transport and telecommunication infrastructure—the networks that connect both China and India to each other and the rest of the world—which are bound to be the keys to the world economy by the middle of the century. In this field, too, India can't sit idly by. It seems far more prudent to ensure from the very start that this will be a collective project, one pregnant with rivalry, but where both countries have major stakes.

This is the most singular and important fact—and paradox—of contemporary geopolitics in this region: political and economic integration and the attendant dilution of borders goes hand in hand with increasing competition regarding how this enlarged space is to be managed and defined.

New clashes, new alliances, new mental maps.

In June 2017, Chinese troops were spotted extending a road through a piece of land also claimed by Bhutan. India perceived this as an unacceptable change to the status quo and crossed its own border with Bhutan to block the Chinese project. Troops from both countries stood facing each other for weeks in Doklam, until a disengagement was negotiated. Retreating a few hundred meters, they are now busy digging in for a larger clash in the future.

India's broader rejection of China's mammoth geopolitical project, the Belt and Road Initiative, seems to have triggered the confrontation that developed last summer. One month before the standoff, China had gathered about thirty national leaders at its first summit devoted to provide guidance for the Belt and Road, part of a broader media and cultural blitz that included television programs and interviews, comprehensive newspaper coverage, music videos, and even bedtime stories for children. For the first time, the Belt and Road was the main story in most international media outlets—many in Europe and the United States were for the first time introduced to the concept.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the loud launch was accompanied by several displays of loud opposition to the project. India announced just one day before the launch event that it would not be participating, explaining that in its current form the Belt and Road would create unsustainable burdens of debt, while ignoring Indian core concerns on sovereignty and territorial integrity. It was a slap in the face to which Beijing felt it had to respond. Three months after Doklam, Washington finally made up its mind about the initiative, calling it a Faustian pact by which countries would exchange their sovereignty for cheap credit.

So what is the Belt and Road, exactly? It is a name, and little more than a name—a means of grouping together and invoking a number of highly significant developments and realities: China's growing international clout, its need to reshape the international economic system in its image, and even the growing reactions and responses to that project.

Past equivalents to the Belt and Road were just as shapeless and ambitious—perhaps concepts such as “capitalism” or “the West” come the closest in spirit.

Chinese authorities feel at home with the idea of a world system articulating the relations of economic power and dependence at the heart of the global economy. Patterns of specialization and comparative advantage determine the place each country assumes in the global economy and, as a result, the levels of absolute and relative prosperity it may hope to achieve. The global economy is less a level playing field than an organized system in which some countries occupy privileged positions and others, such as China, try to rise to commanding heights. It was always thus, you will be told in Beijing. The difference is that now someone else is inching closer to the center.

In economic terms this means that China will be organizing and leading an increasing share of global supply chains, reserving for itself the most valuable segments of production, and creating strong links of collaboration and infrastructure with other countries, whose main role in the system will be to occupy lower-value segments. Politically, Beijing hopes to put in place the same kind of feedback mechanism that the West has benefited from: deeper links of investment, infrastructure and trade which can be used as leverage to shift relations with other countries even more in its favor. The process feeds on itself. Until recently, it seemed that China’s growing influence would be contained to its own peripheries. The fact that countries such as Greece and Hungary now openly defend Chinese positions during important meetings in Brussels has been a rude awakening for the traditional Western center.

The Belt and Road poses a number of specific challenges for India. First and most importantly, as a major economy hoping to pursue a trajectory of fast economic growth, India needs to develop deep international links and supply chains, most immediately in its neighborhood. The Belt and Road may force it into new forms of economic isolation—this time involuntary, as opposed to the years of Indian economic autarchy. Strategic encirclement, the geopolitical counterpart to economic isolation, is a second challenge India faces. When China opened its first military base abroad in Djibouti in 2017,

the reaction in India was unsurprisingly negative, with New Delhi seeing the move as a clear statement of China's ambitions in the Indian Ocean.

In the east, China has built runways and fortified seven artificial islands in the South China Sea, while increasing its presence in Myanmar and planning for a vast network of railways connecting Kunming to the sea. To the north, garrisons, airfields, and new roads stretch along the border in the Himalayas. To the south, China has built a new harbor in Hambantota and modernized the Colombo port for Sri Lanka, a country whose dependency on Beijing keeps increasing. The corridor linking Xinjiang to Gwadar in Pakistan, where China is now preparing to open a military base, only its second extraterritorial outpost—closes the circle.

The Indo-Pacific, as a geographic concept, is neutral. Every actor is coming to the realization that it needs to act in this extended sphere or, in other words, that its objectives cannot be pursued within individual limited areas alone. China and India may be more directly implicated in the change of perspective—indeed, China's rise is leading this shift in the region—but it affects an external actor like the United States no less powerfully when Washington realizes that it is better able to develop a coherent policy towards China and India if it thinks of the two together as part of the same system. Thus the Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's speech prior to his visit to India invoked the "Indo-Pacific" 19 times, while President Donald Trump repeated it like a mantra during his subsequent trip across Asia.

Although every actor shares an understanding of the Indo-Pacific as a single system, individual understandings are to some extent also mutually exclusive. When the United States speaks of the Indo-Pacific as a space of freedom managed by a condominium of India, America, Australia, and Japan, this is not only a project very different from China's Maritime Silk Road, but is, in fact, increasingly being defined in opposition to it. What these four countries seem to share—what separates them from other democracies in the region—is a deepening suspicion of Chinese plans. Thus the attack on the Belt and Road Initiative as a tool for "predatory economics" by Rex Tillerson, for instance; thus the meeting at the sidelines of the recent ASEAN summit between officials from the United States, Japan, Australia, and India to discuss the idea of the "quad" for the first time since it was first

suggested by Japan a decade earlier. While Australia and India have remained lukewarm towards the idea, the Belt and Road has moved them closer to Japan and the United States.

India and Japan, too, are exploring increasing synergies created by the common perception of rising threat to the Asian maritime commons—whether in terms of the Indo-Pacific space (such as the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor) or in more general terms (such as economic and technological cooperation). And theirs is a longstanding flirtation. Their shared Indo-Pacific concept first saw the light of day during a 2007 visit by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to India, where he spoke about the “confluence of two seas.” In the spring and summer of 2007, the Indian navy sailed all the way up to Vladivostok, a Russian port on the Pacific, and conducted a series of bilateral and multilateral exercises with the United States, Japan, Russia, and China.

Unsurprisingly, it was Japan rather than the United States that first realized great power competition would take the form of different projects and models of Eurasian integration. Once you come to the conclusion that integration across the supercontinent is inevitable, the most interesting question immediately arises: What form should it take and under what guidance should it be developed? Geographical realities cannot be understood in a politically neutral way.

That, in the final analysis, explains why China sees a strategic threat in the very concept of the Indo-Pacific. Understood as a geographic concept it merely repeats ideas conceptualized by Beijing in the context of the Belt and Road, but the same underlying reality carries different—opposed—political meanings. The term “Indo-Pacific” is less the acknowledgment of an ineluctable political geography than an initial, inchoate move to create a political initiative, one intended to rival China’s Belt and Road.

Published on: February 13, 2018

Bruno Maçães is a Nonresident Senior Fellow at the Hudson Institute and the author of the newly published *The Dawn of Eurasia* (Allen Lane). A U.S. edition of the book is forthcoming from Yale University Press.