THE INDO-PACIFIC CONSTRUCT IN AUSTRALIA’S WHITE PAPERS: REFLECTIONS FOR ASEAN-AUSTRALIA FUTURE STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

by Lloyd Alexander M. Adducul


What’s in the term?

The security community holds varying perceptions about Indo-Pacific. Albeit Indo does not refer to India but the whole Indian Ocean, the term Indo-Pacific underpins India’s growing regional importance. One school of thought avers that the dominant Asia-Pacific construct appears to be inadequate in capturing India’s increasing role in the region. The other narrative reveals the Indo-Pacific construct’s association with a China-balancing agenda. The term can be construed as a validation of India’s regional role, hence downplaying a Sino-centric regional order.

The starting point for Australia’s acknowledgment of the Indo-Pacific concept traces back to its 2009 Defence White Paper. While the Indian Ocean was initially considered less a strategic priority, its future importance was flagged: “The Indian Ocean will have an increasingly strategic role to play… Australian defence planning will have to contemplate operational concepts for operating in the Indian Ocean region, including with regional partners with whom we share similar strategic interests.”1 This setting paved the way for the 2012 White Paper, Australia in the Asian Century, in which Indo-Pacific was referred to as a “regional construct… linking the Indian and Pacific oceans as one strategic arc that includes Southeast Asia…”2 This Indo-Pacific construct was Australia’s prime consideration in its 2013 Defence White Paper, and was reiterated in the 2016 Defence White Paper and the 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper.

What’s in it for Australia?

The Indo-Pacific has since become the compelling logic for Australia’s strategic and defence planning. Underscoring the maritime environment’s crucial role in military strategy and partnerships, the Indo-Pacific has been described as an evolving region within which Australia conducts strategy.

At the core of Australia’s 2016 Defence and 2017 Foreign Policy White Papers is the need to strengthen the traditional Australia-US alliance system. Arguably, Australia remedies the US’ relative decline in the Indo-Pacific. Amidst China’s assertive economic and strategic ascendance, Canberra does its share to assuage an inert friction between “two of Australia’s most important partners – the United States and China.”3 The white papers underscore the call for the US to retain its leadership role in the region, as Australia acknowledges that it “does not have the capacity to unilaterally
protect and further our global interests.” As such, Canberra has wittingly sided with a rules-based global order that protects its interests, ensures prosperity and protects global stability. Since free trade and military alliances are vital to its future, Australia deems it has the responsibility to remind its traditional partner of these alliance pillars.

In its 2016 Defence White Paper, Australia sets out its “ambitious plan to regenerate the Royal Australian Navy since the Second World War,” thus reaffirming its indubitable role in the regional strategic order. With a sophisticated and globally respected Australian Defence Force, Canberra will be a force to reckon with in the Indo-Pacific.

In this white paper, Australia also recognized that it is “well placed to benefit greatly from the economic growth in the Indo-Pacific region.” The strong cooperation that Australia continues to build with its neighbors is crucial in securing its interests. Its strong bilateral and regional ties, such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) with other Indo-Pacific countries, drive more economic opportunities for Australia.

It is worth mentioning that the 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper regarded India, Japan, Indonesia, and Republic of Korea as countries with which Australia should foster security and economic partnership, and people-to-people links. In this era of flux, it is clear that Australia needs to secure its national interests in partnership with other countries, especially those with which it shares democratic values. Developing close partnerships with these countries can also be interpreted as Australia's strategy to prevent the Indo-Pacific from becoming a source of power conflict. Such divergence of interpretation shows the pitfall of using the Indo-Pacific concept.

What then?

It appears that Indo-Pacific was defined in the white papers more in geographical terms than in a strategic context as the papers leave the Indo-Pacific concept open to myriad understandings. While Australia considers the US’ indispensable role in ensuring a rules-based global order, it does not discount the economic gains in relating with China. As such, it remains unclear if Canberra categorically balances with its traditional ally or hedges in the great power rivalry. Is the Indo-Pacific considered Australia’s strategic system to contain or to engage China? Is it a recognition of India’s increasing eminence to hedge against the latter? Such interpretations may lead to more diverging postulations and expectations on the coherence of the strategy, and its implications for the regional security architecture and Australian policy. Then again, the ambiguity in the use of the Indo-Pacific leaves Canberra some space for strategic calibration in the future.

If the Indo-Pacific concept is envisaged as a multilateral strategy of engagement in the region, a shared operational definition of the Indo-Pacific with Australia’s partners must be in place. This may require consultation with Australia’s like-minded partners to establish a clear-cut strategic cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region. While the revival of the democratic Quadrilateral Security Dialogue may be essential in such discussions, regional forums such as the East Asia Summit (EAS), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (AMM) appear to be more consistent with regional diplomacy as the latter three promote cooperation across other key players in the Indo-Pacific.

Reflections for ASEAN-Australia Strategic Partnership

Recognizing the role of dialogue partners as a driving force in the region’s development, ASEAN has grown since inception to include other state actors in the regional political, economic, and strategic discussion table. ASEAN has regarded Australia with utmost importance in regional diplomacy, as evinced in 1974 when Canberra became ASEAN’s first dialogue partner. Since then, Australia has been invited to and participated in various ASEAN-led forums, including the ARF where it became a co-founding member in 1994, and the EAS in 2005. Compatible, Australia regards ASEAN multilateralism as a significant mechanism to ensure regional stability. As articulated in its latest Defence White Paper, Canberra “strongly supports the contribution of the ASEAN-led regional security architecture to security and stability in South East Asia.” By demonstrating confidence in ASEAN’s efforts, Australia reaffirms its commitment to and support for the organization’s centrality.

For Australia, Southeast Asia remains a security concern that warrants a defence strategy. Safeguarding freedom of navigation from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific basin is critical in ensuring free flow of trade that is vital to ASEAN-
Australia economic partnership. And despite consistently noting that it is not a claimant state, Australia supports a legally binding resolution to the maritime and territorial disputes in the region, as affirmed in its Foreign Policy White Paper. The future of ASEAN-Australia cooperation will thus spring from Indo-Pacific engagement.

However, it is vital to have a clear, agreed, strategic definition of the term Indo-Pacific between ASEAN and Australia. And as the relations will also hinge upon maintaining peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region, ASEAN must also play its role to ensure the security of Southeast Asia vis-à-vis the Indo-Pacific.

Frank Frost acknowledged that multilateral dialogues, among five other factors, will likely affect ASEAN-Australia’s future relations. The ASEAN-Australia Special Summit on 17-18 March 2018 may thus provide an opportunity to discuss the potential of a strategic multilateral Indo-Pacific engagement, among other agenda. By doing so, Australia will not only demonstrate its steadfastness as a partner for regional stability premised on a rules-based order and respect for international law, but will also highlight the importance of ASEAN as a strategic multilateral partner in a dynamic region.

Endnotes

1 2009 Defence White Paper, p. 52
2 2012 White Paper, Australia in the Asian Century, p. 232
3 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper, p. 38
4 2016 Defence White Paper, p. 45
5 Ibid., p. 10
6 2009 Defence White Paper, p. 39
7 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper, pp. 40-42
8 2016 Defence White Paper, p. 57
9 Ibid., p. 69

Lloyd Alexander M. Adducul is a Foreign Affairs Research Specialist with the Center for International Relations and Strategic Studies of the Foreign Service Institute.

Mr. Adducul can be reached at lmadducul@fsi.gov.ph