

Constituting the Indo-Pacific: Securitisation and the Processes of Region-Making

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Abstract

In recent years, securitisation discourses related to regional constructs in Asia have galvanised a shift from the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific. China's rise, particularly the perceived assertiveness and counter-normative nature of its foreign policy, have promoted a growing discourse of enmity, unease and fear, thus facilitating its securitisation by key global and regional actors. Through their promotion of securitisation discourses, political and military leaders in the United States, Japan, India and Australia are demonstrating two interrelated dynamics that reveal the political process of region-making: (1) how securitisation discourse not only exposes the threat perception of individual states, but also the role they see for themselves and others in the management of these threats; and (2) how these securitisation discourses galvanise regional formation and transformation based on shared threat perceptions and modes of threat management. Consequently, the meta-geographical transformation of the Asia-Pacific into the Indo-Pacific is predicated on a political process underpinned by securitisation discourses centred on China. This process has significant implications for regional order as well as security dynamics, particularly because the construction of the Indo-Pacific region by these pivotal actors results in the remaking of the region that situates China and the South China Sea at its centre, thus framing it as the target of containment. Furthermore, the concept of the Indo-Pacific merges the separate strategic spaces of the Pacific and Indian Oceans as a cohesive strategic space, wherein India and smaller Southeast Asian states are also included in securitisation discourses related to China.

Keywords: Securitisation, Indo-Pacific, Asia-Pacific, China, India, Japan, Australia, USA, threat management, speech acts

1. Introduction

For over a decade, there has been a gradual transition from the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific regional construct. This transition has been driven by securitisation discourses emanating from key players such as the United States, Japan, India and Australia. These discourses are aimed at the perceived counter-normative nature of China's foreign policy. While the Indo-Pacific construct has not been universally accepted, most clearly by China but also Russia, it is evident that

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its proponents have remained committed to this transition and have sought additional support from regional actors, especially members of the Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). As a result, there is an ongoing competition of region-making discourses, underpinned by securitisation, that are reframing the region. The importance of this process should not be understated since regional frames affect key policy decisions such as resource allocation and high-level attention, the prioritisation of security partners, as well as the membership and agenda of regional institutions (Medcalf 2018: 10).

Although the Indo-Pacific construct does not appear to possess clearly delineated boundaries, through their speech acts, its proponents have revealed important features. The most obvious is the framing of the Indian and Pacific Ocean regions as a connected economic, political and strategic space. In this framing, Southeast Asia and the South China Sea (SCS) become the regional pivot since they serve as a conduit between the two oceans. Consequently, securitising discourses focused on promoting a “free and open Indo-Pacific” not only reveal international norms that are perceived to be at risk, such as freedom of navigation, but also how the undermining of such a norms endangers key sea lanes of communications (SLOCs), particularly along chokepoints in the SCS. Additionally, they reveal that it is China’s actions along this space that are perceived to pose a risk to these norms. In other words, securitisation is doing more than illustrating the dominant security dynamics of the region; it is also revealing the region-makers and their vision for the region.

This study aims to trace the transformation from the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific as a result of securitisation discourses. It focuses on four key actors: the United States, Japan, India and Australia. These cases are selected since each of them has identified the others as key members of the new regional construct. As a result, their cases help illustrate how the process of region-making involves recognition of membership, and thus the spatiality of a regional construct. Additionally, these cases reveal how securitisation patterns not only expose the threat perception of individual states, but also the role they see for themselves and others in the management of these threats. Lastly, they reveal how securitisation shapes regional formation and transformation based on shared threat perceptions and modes of threat management.

2. Securitisation and region-making

Securitisation theory contends that security issues are not objectively “out there” but rather, that they are socially constructed through speech acts. As originally formulated by Ole Waever and Barry Buzan, the Copenhagen School intrinsically ties survival to the concept of security (Buzan et al. 1998: 21). Con-

sequently, the construction of security issues begins with a speech act designating a referent object as being existentially threatened. In other words, what makes “a specifically ‘security’ act – a ‘securitization’ – is its casting of an issue as an ‘existential threat’ which calls for extraordinary measures beyond the routines and norms of everyday politics” (Williams 2003: 514). This process is initiated by a securitising actor and may be shaped by functional actors (Buzan et al. 1998: 36). In essence, securitisation shifts issues out of the realm of normal politics by elevating them to security issues.

While this conceptualisation of securitisation paved the way for a significant body of work in the subfield of security studies, the theory has received several refinements. For example, scholars who have sought to apply the theory to non-democratic regimes do not see the distinction between “normal” and “extraordinary” politics as necessary (Vuori 2008, Balzacq 2011). Additionally, there has been a move towards recognising the importance of images and popular culture as contributors to the process of securitisation, thus moving beyond speech acts as the sole mechanism (Williams 2003, Hansen 2011, Heck / Schlag 2012). Perhaps the most comprehensive refinement of securitisation theory has been provided by Thierry Balzacq, who defined securitisation as

an articulated assemblage of practices whereby heuristic artefacts (metaphors, policy tools, image repertoires, analogies, stereotypes, emotions, etc.) are contextually mobilised by a securitizing actor, who works to prompt an audience to build a coherent network of implications (feelings, sensations, thoughts, and intuitions) about the critical vulnerability of a referent object, that concurs with the securitizing actor’s reasons for choices and actions, by investing the referent subject with such an aura of unprecedented threatening complexion that a customised policy must be immediately undertaken to block it. (Balzacq 2011: 3)

This definition not only expands on the performative aspects of speech acts by recognising images as a component, it also recognises the crucial role that context and audience play in successful securitisation. Additionally, it also distinguishes between the referent object, the entity that is threatened, and the referent subject, the entity that is threatening. Finally, it highlights the importance of distinctive policy proposals as being a component of securitisation. In other words, it “combines the politics of threat design with that of threat management” (Balzacq et al. 2015: 2). It is in this form that this study aims to utilise securitisation.

As indicated above, securitisation not only reveals what is to be secured, by whom, from whom and how, the process also has implications for region-making. Specifically, in the same way that securitisation represents the social construction of security threats, it also has a role in the social construction of regions. While this aspect of securitisation is recognised in Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), the theory places great importance on geographical proximity (Buzan / Waever 2003: 44–46). More importantly, the manner in

which securitisation is utilised in RSCT is narrowly focused on how the processes of securitisation and desecuritisation are so interlinked that a state's security problems cannot be reasonably analysed or resolved apart from others in the region (ibid.: 44). In other words, it omits the process in which states, through their securitisation efforts, aim to situate themselves, and others, within a given geographic space or the role they aim to play; it lacks intentionality.

Accounting for this dynamic allows for a better understanding of what Iver B. Neumann (1994) calls the Region-Building Approach. This approach contends that regions are socially constructed. As a result, they are expected to be in a constant state of being defined and redefined by their constituent members as they attempt to situate themselves at the core of the region (Neumann 1994: 53). The Region-Building Approach not only assesses how regions are constructed, but also how region-builders bring them into existence. Thus, the existence of regions is preceded by region-builders that, as part of a political project, imagine a certain spatial and chronological identity for a region, and then proceed to disseminate this imagined identity to others (ibid.: 58)

Securitisation, while not explicitly noted as a component of the Region-Building Approach, is inherently embedded in this process. Through securitisation, key actors not only participate in the construction of security threats but also in region-making. The process of identifying the referent object, subject, audience and policy solutions reveals the regional frames of these actors. Consequently, whether implicitly or explicitly, as is the case in this study, the securitising actors also acquire the role of region-builders.

3. Constituting the Indo-Pacific

3.1. Japan and the confluence of the two seas

The idea of connecting the Pacific and Indian Oceans as a macroregional geopolitical space has historical precedents (Medcalf 2018: 14). However, contemporary efforts to promote the transition from the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific construct have been spearheaded by Japanese officials, particularly Former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. On 22 August 2007, during his first and short-lived tenure as PM, Abe gave a speech at the Indian parliament titled "Confluence of the Two Seas". The speech highlighted a number of key themes that frame the discursive and empirical transformation of the region. The first theme was the expanded spatiality of the region. According to Abe, "the Pacific and the Indian Oceans are now bringing about a dynamic coupling as seas of freedom and of prosperity" (Abe 2007). This "broader Asia", as he called it, would "evolve into an immense network spanning the entirety of the Pacific Ocean, incorpo

rating the United States of America and Australia” (ibid.). By linking the two oceans and identifying core constituents, Abe was establishing the spatiality of the Indo-Pacific construct.

The second theme from this speech touched on the normative foundations of this “broader Asia”. According to Abe, Japan was rediscovering India, a partner that he believed shared the same values and interests. Specifically, India was to be a partner for enriching the “seas of freedom and prosperity” in a manner that would be open and transparent to all (Abe 2007). To this end, the shared values of freedom, democracy and respect for human rights are meant to be the normative foundation for regional cooperation. Abe indicated that as “broader Asia” took shape at the confluence of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, it was crucial for democratic nations located at the cardinal directions of these seas to deepen their cooperation. By setting out the normative foundations of the construct, Abe is also making the appeal that these must be protected.

The third and final theme revealed the securitisation process that underpinned the previous two. It is evident that maritime security was at the core of the “Confluence of the Two Seas” speech. Abe indicated that as maritime states, India and Japan had vital interests in the security of the SLOCs of the region, adding that these sea lanes were “the shipping routes that are the most critical for the world economy” (Abe 2007). While he is not explicit about the referent subject, by identifying the referent object in the context of the normative foundations, it is clear his main concern was China. In other words, freedom of navigation, as well as Abe’s perception that China’s military modernisation and foreign policy posed a threat to the SLOCs, was the imperative for his efforts to reshape the Asia-Pacific into the Indo-Pacific by bringing India into the fold.

Shortly after his re-election as PM in 2012, Abe authored an op-ed titled “Asia’s Democratic Security Diamond”. While his address to the Indian parliament could be considered a subtle securitisation effort, this op-ed was more explicit. The three themes indicated above were present once again. Abe stated that “peace, stability, and freedom of navigation in the Pacific Ocean are inseparable from peace, stability, and freedom of navigation in the Indian Ocean”, thus linking the Indian and Pacific Ocean through a securitisation speech act (Abe 2012). Here again, Australia, India, Japan and the United States were identified as key partners, although India’s role was particularly elevated. Specifically, he indicated that India, as a “resident power in East Asia, with the Andaman and Nicobar Islands sitting at the western end of the Strait of Malacca (through which some 40 per cent of world trade passes) – deserves greater emphasis” (ibid.)

The normative foundations also remained the same, namely, the importance of democracy. According to Abe, Japan is a mature maritime democracy; as a result, its choice of close partners should reflect that fact. Although he indicates that stable relations with China are vital to the well-being of many in

Japan, “diplomacy must always be rooted in democracy, the rule of law, and respect for human rights” (Abe 2012). In other words, values that he does not believe China represents.

It is clear from this op-ed that maritime security is at the centre of Abe’s “Democratic Security Diamond” and that he sees China’s actions as the primary threat. He contends that “the South China Sea seems set to become a ‘Lake Beijing’”, thus posing a threat to freedom of navigation. In fact, Abe explicitly linked China’s actions in the ongoing Sino-Japanese dispute over the Senkaku / Diaoyu Islands to developments in the SCS, indicating that China’s “daily exercises in coercion” in the East China Sea (ECS) are part of an effort by Beijing to make its presence appear ordinary, and to unilaterally establish its jurisdiction in the waters surrounding the islands as a *fait accompli* (Abe 2012). He argued that Japan must resist these moves, adding that if it yielded, the SCS would become more fortified and that freedom of navigation would be “seriously hindered” (*ibid.*). Here again, it is Japan’s securitisation of China’s policy that serves as the catalyst for regional transformation.

The speech and op-ed discussed above, while not an exhaustive representation of Japan’s securitisation of China, reveal the dynamics behind the politics of threat design and threat management. In this case, Abe serves as the securitising actor who identifies the referent objects that are threatened, such as freedom of navigation. In doing so, he also identifies China and its policies as the referent subject. The audiences in this case are domestic and international, to which Japanese officials are appealing based on shared similar values. Collectively, these represent the process of threat design. This process also reveals the preferred forms of threat management. It is evident from Abe’s efforts to bring together democracies, particularly those strategically located on the margins of the Indo-Pacific, that the management, or containment, of China’s policy is the goal. Additionally, it serves as the basis for Japan’s promotion of the “Proactive Contribution to Peace” as the basic principle for its national security strategy. This concept recognises Japan’s archipelagic status and thus its need for an open and stable maritime order. It also indicates that Japan “intends to contribute to the development of the world economy while securing its own economic growth and prosperity through expansion of the open, rule-based international economic system” (Government of Japan 2014). In other words, Japan aims to play a greater security role.

As the twin dynamics of securitisation, both threat design and threat management can also produce regional transformations. In this case, Japanese officials serve as the region-builders who not only situate Japan as a core member of the region, but also identify other core constituents. In doing so, the region-builders redefine the spatiality of the region. Consequently, Japan’s recognition of India as a strategic partner and constituent of the region expands the Asia-Pacific by adding the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), thus generating the Indo-Pacific. This

regional construct, where Australia, India, Japan and the United States are each located at strategic cardinal locations of the Indo-Pacific, situates the referent object and subject at the centre. In other words, freedom of navigation through the region's SLOCs must be secured against China's policies, which have been securitised.

3.2. India's Act East Policy

The Indian Ocean Region is a key component of the Indo-Pacific construct. As a resident power in the IOR, India sees itself as a security provider for the region, and consequently, a key player in the Indo-Pacific (Ensuring Secure Seas 2015: 8). However, in the context of existing Sino-Indian territorial disputes and growing geopolitical competition, New Delhi sees China's ability to project power into the IOR as detrimental to its position as well as the stability of the region (Chand / Garcia 2017). These concerns are encapsulated in securitisation discourses surrounding a potential Chinese "string of pearls" in the IOR and the threat this would pose to freedom of navigation along crucial SLOCs and choke points.

Traditionally, India has sought to maintain and limit its presence within South Asia. Given China's increasing presence in the Indian Ocean, India is increasingly redefining the spatiality of its strategic space, leading to the rapid disappearance of differentiation between the Indian and Pacific Oceans (Scott 2012: 93). Official documents such as the Indian Navy's report "Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy" demonstrate the growing acceptance of the Indo-Pacific construct, by acknowledging the shift from a Euro-Atlantic to an Indo-Pacific focus (Indian Navy 2015: ii). More importantly, the report links the Indo-Pacific to India's Act East Policy, signalling acceptance of the Indo-Pacific spatial concept and highlighting Indian interests within that region. In 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi began promoting the Act East Policy, which was meant to be a replacement of the previous Look East Policy. First used by the then Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj, the Act East Policy was initially conceptualised to accelerate India's economic engagement with Southeast Asia (Jaishankar 2019: 13). India's growing interests in Southeast Asia (and beyond) prompted discursive shifts from Indian leaders.

The discourses used by Indian political elites are no longer tied to South Asia alone. At the Indian Ocean Conference in the Maldives in 2019, Indian External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar stated that the Indo-Pacific was a priority for India and "the logical next step after the Act East and a break out from the confines of South Asia" (Ministry of External Affairs India 2019a). That same year, Jaishankar articulated India's geographic conceptualisation of the Indo-Pacific stating that, "economic and civilizational impulses link the eastern

and southern shores of Africa through the Gulf, the Arabian Sea island nations, the Indian subcontinent, Southeast Asia, Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific Islands” (Ministry of External Affairs India 2019b). Translating this conception on the ground, India began the groundwork in 2014 by expanding naval arrangements with Sri Lanka and the Maldives by inviting the Seychelles and Mauritius into an Indian Ocean security grouping that is unofficially called the IO-5 (Brewster 2014). More importantly, India has joined the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad), reaffirming its position in the Indo-Pacific construct.

New Delhi has also been proactive in rhetorically defining its normative basis for the Indo-Pacific. In 2018, PM Modi delivered the keynote speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue held in Singapore. During this speech, Modi emphasised the importance of the Act East Policy in connecting with its neighbours to the East. In the realm of security, he emphasised the role played by the Indian Navy in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. More importantly, he stated that the Indo-Pacific region’s common prosperity and security necessitated the development of a “common rules-based order for the region”, adding that “it must equally apply to all individually as well as to the global commons” (Ministry of External Affairs India 2018). This order, he argued, must “believe in sovereignty and territorial integrity, as well as equality of all nations, irrespective of size and strength” where “equal access to the use of common spaces on sea and in the air are rights under international law” (*ibid.*). Finally, Modi stated that India was committed to upholding international norms, including a free, open, and inclusive region in accordance with international law relating to the use of common spaces on sea and air. In stating this, he positioned India as a central player in the region that backs international norms and law as well as their inviolability (Ministry of External Affairs India 2018). Consequently, Modi is not only setting the foundational norms of the Indo-Pacific that need to be protected; he is positioning India as a steward and protector of those norms, thus validating its regional role.

The securitisation discourse that underpins India’s framing of the Indo-Pacific rests heavily on maritime security and directly links to China’s increased activity in the IOR. The “National Security Strategy” document, commissioned by the Indian National Congress party, indicates that China’s rise and growing assertiveness poses the most significant long-term challenge for India (Indian National Congress 2019: 10). This concern is reflected in its securitisation discourse. The referent objects are clear: India’s interests in South Asia, freedom of navigation, open airspace and territorial integrity. These are directly linked to three Chinese activities in the region: (1) the strategic encirclement of India by China through the latter’s endeavours in South Asia; (2) India’s concerns for freedom of navigation in the SCS, which includes its crucial trade links with eastern Asia; and (3) increased Chinese forays into the Indian Ocean on the basis of

anti-piracy patrols (Rajagopalan 2020: 79). In other words, China is the referent subject in India's securitisation discourse.

The framing of China as a referent subject in these securitisation discourses also informs the modes of threat management. To ensure the protection of India's strategic referent objects, it has also made commitments to manage any threats that might emerge to undermine them. The Act East Policy is touted as a means of promoting Indian engagements with Southeast Asia but also of strengthening ties with states in the region that have significantly strained ties with China, namely Vietnam and to some extent, Singapore, Indonesia and the Philippines. India has also sought closer ties in the Indo-Pacific with states that share normative approaches such as Japan, Australia and the United States, which has culminated in India's engagement with the Quad (Basu 2020, The White House 2017, Ministry of External Affairs India 2014).

Another means through which India pursues its threat management vis-à-vis China is the Malabar exercises in the Bay of Bengal. In November 2020, India hosted the navies of the United States, Japan and Australia. The Indian Navy stated it as a "commitment of the participating countries to support a free, open, inclusive Indo-Pacific as well as a rules-based international order" (The Hindu 2020). Commander Ryan T. Easterday of the USS John S. McCain destroyer said that "Malabar provides an opportunity for like-minded navies, sharing a common vision of a more stable, open, and prosperous Indo-Pacific, to operate and train alongside one another" (Johnson 2020). The norms of a stable and open Indo-Pacific are reiterated, highlighting their importance and securitising the threats to them, which are to be managed by forging ties with other powers that share common views on the Indo-Pacific. Overall, India's threat management approach has focused on forging closer ties with states that share common norms of open oceans and seas, along with a commitment to the open rules-based multilateral order.

3.3. Australia's balancing act

Australia has perceived itself to be a key actor in Pacific affairs, especially in Oceania. Moreover, like other members of the Quad, Canberra has actively promoted the emergence of the Indo-Pacific construct through securitisation discourse from key officials and documents. In the Foreign Policy White Paper of 2017, the Australian Government articulates the country's framing of the Indo-Pacific. In this paper, former Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull stated that Australia is determined to realise a "secure, open, and prosperous Indo-Pacific" (Australian Government 2017: iii). This White Paper also highlighted the spatial demarcation of the Indo-Pacific as the region ranging from the eastern Indian

Ocean to the Pacific Ocean, including Southeast Asia, India, North Asia and the United States (*ibid.*: 1). It is also evident that through its framing of the Indo-Pacific, Australia sees itself as a central actor in the region. Prime Minister Scott Morrison illustrated this in a 2019 address in which he contended that Australia was not only a constituent member of the Indo-Pacific. The region was also where it exercised its “greatest influence” and could “make the most meaningful impact and contribution” (Asialink 2019).

Official statements and documents indicate that the normative foundations of Australia’s Indo-Pacific construct are predicated on norms similar to those espoused by the United States, Japan and India. In essence, Canberra asserts strong democratic credentials with emphases on the rule of law and freedom. For example, the Foreign Policy White Paper highlights Australia’s commitment to promoting an open and inclusive Indo-Pacific region where international order is maintained through adherence to international rules. It particularly highlights the importance of maintaining free access to the oceans and seas for all states (Australian Government 2017: 6–7). This is echoed in the Defence White Paper, which indicates that “Australia has a strong interest in the maintenance of peace and stability, respect for international law, unimpeded trade and freedom of navigation and overflight” (Department of Defence Australia 2016: 57). During a visit to Kuala Lumpur in 2019, Secretary of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Frances Adamson, laid out Australia’s vision for the Indo-Pacific, which is encapsulated in the two aforementioned White Papers. This vision focuses on four normative components: (1) the resolution of disputes through mechanisms afforded by international law and without the threat or use of force and coercion; (2) open markets; (3) inclusive economic integration; and (4) freedom of navigation and overflight, in which the rights of small states are protected (Adamson 2019).

By articulating the normative foundations of its vision for the Indo-Pacific, Australian official discourse also reveals the need for their protection. In fact, these norms are perceived as being intrinsically linked to Australia’s security. This was illustrated by Adamson during a speech at Australian National University, in which she stated that Australia would be “more secure in a region characterised by respect for international law and other norms and where disputes are resolved peacefully” (Adamson 2018). It is also evident that Australia sees key democracies in the region as playing an important role in supporting its vision for the Indo-Pacific. The Foreign Policy White Paper explicitly indicates that democracies such as Japan, Indonesia, India and the Republic of Korea are “partners of first order importance” (Australian Government 2017: 40). Overall, the normative foundations for Australia’s approach towards the Indo-Pacific rest on shared democratic ideas, freedom of navigation and a commitment to international norms and rules. These are largely in congruence with the

outlooks of normative foundations espoused by Japan, India and the United States.

Australia's securitisation discourse focuses on concerns over the undermining of the aforementioned norms. In August 2019, Australian PM Scott Morrison and Vietnamese PM Nguyen Xuan Phuc released a joint statement expressing "concern about disruptive activities in relation to long-standing oil and gas projects in the South China Sea" (Elmer 2019). The joint statement did not mention China, but its backdrop includes Chinese activities in the Vietnamese-controlled Vanguard Bank of the Spratly Islands, where China had deployed several maritime vessels, including a survey ship. China's activities in the South China Sea (SCS) are viewed as particularly concerning. The Defence White Paper voices Australia's concern and opposition to land reclamation efforts in the SCS as well as the construction of artificial structures (Department of Defence Australia 2016: 58). Importantly, it adds that Canberra "opposes the assertion of associated territorial claims and maritime rights which are not in accordance with international law" (ibid.).

These securitisation discourses illustrate a perceived threat to the stability of a rules-based order, particularly to the key norms that underpin it, such as sovereignty, territorial integrity and freedom of navigation. Morrison made this point in 2019 when he argued that stability of the post-war order has been predicated on the "respect for the individual sovereign state, no matter how large or small, and the ambition that each may be able to engage and participate with the security afforded by a common set of rules that means they can get a fair go, free of coercion" (Asialink 2019). While China is not explicitly identified as the referent subject in these securitisation discourses, it is clear, given the activities referenced and the context in which they were uttered, that it is Beijing's policies that are considered as threatening to the established norms and order.

Given its implicit recognition of China as the referent subject in its securitisation discourses, Australia premises its threat management through its existing alliance network and strategic partnerships with countries such as the United States, Japan, India, New Zealand, Vietnam, Singapore and Indonesia (Asialink 2019). Australia has also emphasised democracy as an effective threat management technique, as showcased by its extensive engagement in the Quad, and more recently, its participation in the Malabar exercise. Its worsening relations with China in light of the SCS disputes and Beijing's threats of economic retaliation in line with Australia's critique of its handling of the COVID-19 pandemic have prompted Canberra to strengthen its response vis-à-vis China (Grossman 2020). For example, as a response to growing fears of cyberattacks from China, Australia has committed to spending \$500,000 to set up a tech network for the Quad (Hurst 2020).

Australia recognises the threats emanating from China, particularly with regard to competing claims in the SCS. This is particularly evident in the growing tensions between the two countries. While recognising the important economic relationship between the two countries, Canberra's official discourse clearly refers to other players such as Vietnam, Japan, India and the United States, who share concerns about China's activities, as strategic "partners" or "allies" (Asialink 2019). Thus, Australia's pragmatic foreign policy highlights the importance of engaging China economically while also concurrently working on constructing threat management mechanisms through fostering close security ties for threat management with the United States and norms-based alliance partnerships with other regional democracies such as Japan, South Korea and India.

3.4. The U.S. and the free and open Indo-Pacific

The American shift towards the Indo-Pacific regional construct began through the Obama administration's "Pivot to Asia" strategy, in which former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton played a key role. Clinton first used the term "Indo-Pacific" in 2010 during a speech in Hawai'i where she discussed the growing U.S.-India naval partnership, which she felt highlighted the importance of the Indo-Pacific basin (Clinton 2010). The following year she penned an op-ed in the journal *Foreign Policy* where she indicated that translating the "growing connection between the Indian and Pacific oceans into an operational concept" was crucial for adapting to "new challenges in the region" (Clinton 2011). In this op-ed, Clinton stated that America's alliance system in the region would serve as the fulcrum of the pivot to Asia, and that the U.S.-Japan alliance was the "cornerstone of peace and stability in the region" (ibid.). Importantly, she revealed the need to reframe the "alliance with Australia from a Pacific partnership to an Indo-Pacific one" (ibid.), thus illustrating the transformation of the regional context of the U.S.-Australian relationship. Lastly, Clinton identified India as a key democratic partner in the safeguarding of freedom of navigation along pivotal SLOCs (Clinton 2011). In essence, she identified three core constituent members of the American Indo-Pacific construct, all of which are democratic states that are perceived to share similar values.

Other officials in the Obama administration also echoed Clinton's framing. Former U.S. Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, during a speech in New Delhi, stated that "as India 'looks east' and the United States 'rebalances', our interests across the full span of the Indo-Pacific region are aligning more closely than ever", thus highlighting the important place that India occupies in the U.S. framing of the Indo-Pacific, in addition to key allies like Japan and Australia (Hagel 2014). Hagel also indicated that due to "shared interest in maritime security in the region, including the global crossroads of the South China Sea",

closer cooperation was needed to “protect freedom of navigation in the air and sea” (*ibid.*). Clinton’s successor, former Secretary of State John Kerry was also proactive in the promotion of the Indo-Pacific construct. During his visit to Sri Lanka in 2015, he stated that the United States was “providing leadership on maritime security in the Indian Ocean in association with close friends and allies across the region, including India, Australia, Indonesia, and Japan”, adding that Washington opposed “the use of intimidation or force to assert a territorial or maritime claim by anyone” in the Indo-Pacific (Kerry 2015).

While the “Pivot to Asia” served as the platform for America’s construction of the Indo-Pacific during the Obama administration, the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP) took on this mantle during the Trump administration. During his visit to New Delhi in 2017, former Secretary of Defense James Mattis followed a similar discourse set out by Obama-era counterparts, stating that a “peaceful and prosperous future in the Indo-Pacific region is based on a strong rules-based international order and a shared commitment to international law, to peaceful resolution of disputes and respect for territorial integrity” (Mattis 2017). Mattis indicated that U.S.-Indian defence cooperation was predicated on a convergence of mutual interests, adding that India’s designation as a defence partner reflected Washington’s recognition of New Delhi’s role as a “pillar of regional stability and security” (*ibid.*).

Former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson echoed these points during a speech at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in 2017, when he argued that the United States and India shared mutual interests in peace, security and freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific (Tillerson 2017). Tillerson stated that the two countries should serve as “the Eastern and Western beacons” that maintain a free and open architecture in the region, adding that the Indo-Pacific “will be the most consequential part of the globe in the 21st century” (*ibid.*). During this speech, Tillerson also highlighted the important role that democracies such as India, as well as allies like Australia and Japan, play in strengthening the rule of law and furthering prosperity and security in the region (Tillerson 2017).

The clearest articulation of the Trump administration’s “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP) strategy was given by the Deputy Secretary of the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Alex Wong. During a briefing in 2018, Wong deconstructed the strategy to its constitutive parts. He indicated that the word “free” meant that the nations of the Indo-Pacific should be “free from coercion” and that their societies should be free in terms of “good governance”, “human rights” and “transparency and anti-corruption” (Wong 2018). These points implicitly speak to China’s coercive policies in the region as well as the illiberal nature of its regime. In regard to the word “open”, Wong stated that it referred to “open sea lanes of communication and open airways”, “open logistics”, “open investment” and “open trade” (*ibid.*). Here again, China appears

to be the target, particularly its investment and lending practices, vis-à-vis the Belt and Road Initiative. Lastly, he highlights that the reason for the adoption of the “Indo-Pacific” concept is twofold: (1) “it acknowledges the historical reality and the current-day reality that South Asia, and in particular India, plays a key role in the Pacific and in East Asia and in Southeast Asia” and (2) it is in the U.S.’s and the region’s interest that “India play an increasingly weighty role in the region” (*ibid.*). Wong adds that as a democracy, India is invested in a Free and Open Indo-Pacific that can serve to anchor a free and open order in the region. These points illustrate two important aspects of the Trump administration’s FOIP strategy. The first is the key role that India plays in Washington’s policies in the region. The second is that it reflects a balancing logic that frames India, a democratic country, as a bookend in the regional construct, opposite the United States, with China, an authoritarian country, situated in the middle.

While the securitisation of China is implicitly present in statements by key government officials, it is much more explicit in official government documents. For example, Trump’s National Security Strategy (2017: 45–46) contends that “a geopolitical competition between free and repressive visions of world order is taking place in the Indo-Pacific”. China’s threat to freedom of navigation and regional stability is specifically outlined. The State Department’s Free and Open Indo-Pacific document argues that “authoritarian revisionist powers seek to advance their parochial interest at others’ expense” (U.S. Department of State 2019: 5). The document singles out China’s policies as threatening freedom of navigation in the region, and adds that Beijing’s claims in the SCS, based on the “preposterous ‘nine-dash line,’ are unfounded, unlawful, and unreasonable” (*ibid.*: 23). Lastly, the U.S. Department of Defense’s Indo-Pacific Strategy Report states that China’s policies undermine “the international system from within by exploiting its benefits while simultaneously eroding the values and principles of the rules-based order” (U.S. Department of Defense 2019: 7). The report calls attention to China’s abuse of human rights at the domestic level as well as its coercion of neighbouring states in the ECS and the SCS (*ibid.*: 8).

Collectively, these official discourses frame the spatiality of the Indo-Pacific construct by identifying key constituent members and their roles, the normative underpinnings of the region, as well as the referent objects that are perceived as threatened. While China is not always explicitly identified as the referent subject, it is implicit that repeated mentions of freedom of navigation, open markets and fair competition allude to areas in which Beijing’s policies are perceived as threatening. Additionally, by focusing on the role of alliances, strategic partnerships and regional institutions, these officials are revealing preferred modes of threat management.

4. Convergence and divergence

The brief cases presented above indicate several points of convergence among the region-builders: (1) each actor acknowledges the other as a core constituent of the Indo-Pacific construct; (2) they share core values that establish the normative foundations of the construct, particularly a rules-based order underpinned by international law; and (3) they intentionally mobilise securitisation discourses to support the previous two points and to promote the construction of the Indo-Pacific. Despite these important areas of convergence, however, none of the region-builders' conceptions of the Indo-Pacific are identical. The two main points of divergence are based on the spatiality of their respective Indo-Pacific constructs, as well as the degree to which China should be contained.

While the four region-builders explicitly identify each other as key partners in their efforts to promote the Indo-Pacific construct, their conception of the region's spatiality varies. This variation is predicated on the key roles they seek to play and the areas they prioritise. Japan's conception of the Indo-Pacific is the most expansive. The U.S.-Japan alliance, particularly the role that Japan plays in the forward projection of U.S. forces, as well as the regular military exercises the two conduct across the Pacific, indicate that Tokyo incorporates the entire Pacific region in its understanding of the Indo-Pacific. Additionally, Japan possesses several small islands in the central Pacific, which by necessity require attention. What makes Japan's conception of the Indo-Pacific the most expansive, however, is its inclusion of the African continent. Its FOIP vision illustrates how the "two oceans" link the "two continents" of Asia and Africa (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Japan 2020). This is being promoted through its "Asia Africa Growth Corridor" (ERIA 2017).

The United States appears to have the second most expansive spatiality of the Indo-Pacific as well as the most clearly defined. It is defined by the area of responsibility of the Indo-Pacific Command, one of the six commands designated by the U.S. Department of Defense. This command replaced the former Pacific Command in 2018 in recognition of the "increasing connectivity of the Indian and Pacific Oceans" (Mattis 2018). It is evident that the State Department's FOIP document follows the framing that the Department of Defense has set out, which brings spatial cohesion to the regional construct. This spatiality covers the entire Pacific Ocean but only involves a little over half of the Indian Ocean since it ends at 68 degrees east, leaving out East Africa and the Middle East, which are under the area of responsibility of other commands.

Australia's conception of the Indo-Pacific is more limited than the U.S. and Japan's. Its Pacific Ocean reach is focused on Pacific Island nations in Oceania, where it sees itself as a pivotal player. This is part of Australia's self-image as a middle power. However, there has been greater emphasis on the ECS and espe-

cially the SCS due to the strategic choke points on which its foreign trade is reliant. This extends to key choke points in the Indian Ocean, which are also vital. However, much like the United States, Australia's focus in the Indian Ocean is limited to its eastern half (Australian Government 2017: 1). This focus is natural given Australia's paradoxical geographical realities, which place it relatively near key chokepoints, yet distant from its largest trade partners.

Among the four actors discussed in this study, India has the most limited framing of the Indo-Pacific. Notwithstanding its growing partnership with the United States and Japan, it is clear that India centres its conception of the Indo-Pacific around the Indian Ocean Rim Association and its members (Ministry of External Affairs India 2019b). This includes the entirety of the Indian Ocean Rim (IOR) as well as sections of the Western Pacific, namely, Southeast Asia and part of Oceania. This framing is understandable given India's geographic centrality in the IOR as well as its self-image as a regional power. Its expanding relationship with Western Pacific states maps neatly onto its Indo-Pacific construct since it demonstrates the reality of interconnectivity as well as India's budding power projection capabilities.

The various spatialities of the Indo-Pacific are important. As indicated previously, regional frames shape policy. The nascent stage of the Indo-Pacific construct means that, at this point, it is difficult to evaluate how these different spatialities will affect the stability of the region as well as the degree of cooperation among key constituents, particularly over mutual security interests evident in the securitisation discourses. However, it is clear that the choke points in the IOR, ECS and especially the SCS are central to the regional spatiality of these four actors. This indicates that threat management cooperation is likelier in these areas.

The implicit or explicit securitisation of China by these four actors indicates that there is consensus regarding the threat that its policies pose to the norms they value. There is also consensus regarding cooperation to address these threats. While modes of threat management are likely to vary based on the degree of economic interdependence, territorial disputes and geopolitical rivalries, there does appear to be a convergence in a preferred approach for dealing with Beijing's policies – namely, economic and security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific in order to provide smaller states in the region with options for economic and political diversification (Chand / Garcia 2017). In other words, these actors aim to present themselves as alternatives, or even complements, capable of providing public goods that will mitigate overreliance on China. The goal is to deprive Beijing of the opportunity to establish dominance in the region without significant costs. Although coordination of these efforts remains nascent, it is clear in official statements and documents that these countries view this approach as the most effective avenue for managing or containing China's policies.

5. Conclusion

The complex securitisation patterns linking the United States, Japan, India and Australia have been the primary drivers of the shift from the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific regional construct. This reveals that securitisation not only serves as a means to understand threat construction and management, but also plays a role in region-making. Through the securitisation process, actors reveal the process through which they situate themselves and others in a geographic space. Furthermore, they reveal the roles they aim to play as well as those they see other actors play. As a result, securitising actors are not only deeply involved in the political process of setting the geographical boundaries but also in identifying the key players, and therefore members, of a regional construct. Lastly, securitisation shapes the region-making process through its identification of shared threat perceptions and modes of threat management.

These securitisation processes, which have galvanised the formation of the Indo-Pacific, reveal important dynamics. The first is that norms of freedom of navigation and democracy serve as the ideational foundation of the Indo-Pacific construct. They also serve as the referent object that is perceived as being threatened and thus needs to be secured. The second is that China's actions in the IOR, the SCS and the ECS are perceived as threatening to these norms, thus becoming the referent subject. The third is that the mechanism of threat management focuses on increased political, economic and military cooperation among the United States, Japan, India and Australia. The purpose is to manage or contain Chinese policies in the region that are perceived as counter-normative. It remains to be seen whether this regional transformation can achieve this; however, it is evident that its proponents see the validity in cooperating and coordinating their efforts to this end.

The growing salience of the Indo-Pacific region construct has important implications for the region. More than a mere change in name, the emergence of the Indo-Pacific has created a new geopolitical space that expands the number of participants and increases the complexity of security relations. Illustrative of the increased complexity that comes with the Indo-Pacific is the transformation of regional hierarchy. While the Asia-Pacific regional construct was spearheaded by the United States and was managed through its power projection capabilities and its hub-and-spoke alliance system, the Indo-Pacific is being proactively spearheaded by a variety of actors including India, which is not a formal alliance partner of the United States. In other words, rather than the hierarchical structure that dominated the Asia-Pacific, the Indo-Pacific appears to possess an ad-hoc structure in which key actors cooperate and coordinate on key issues surrounding the maintenance of freedom of navigation, as well as the protection of SLOCs and choke points, with China squarely in its focus.

This means that while the United States will continue to play a key role in regional security, Japan, India and Australia are taking prominent roles in the new regional construct. This is evident in Japan's "Proactive Contribution to Peace" strategy, India's Act East Policy and Australia's White Papers.

Theoretically, the nexus of securitisation and region-building opens avenues to explore the impact of securitisation processes on the conceptions of regions. For example, through the securitisation of China, which is underpinned by the importance of norms such as open seas and multilateralism, the entire strategic conceptualisation of the Indian and Pacific Oceans has begun to transform. The Indo-Pacific construct now invokes ideas of a new region and a new space wherein new challenges and opportunities exist. As such, the securitisation and region-building approach may offer insights into the discursive process in which we understand geopolitical concepts, as well as revealing how new conceptions shape the behaviour of states as they interpret their environment.

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