

Indo-Pacific Strategies and the South China Sea: Views from the Region

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Background

Karl Haushofer (1869-1946), the Bavarian general, geographer, and adjunct professor for geography at the University of Munich, is credited with the invention of the term “Indo-Pacific” as a geopolitical unit, especially through his work “German cultural politics in the Indo-Pacific Space” (published 1939).¹ Karl Haushofer not only mentioned the oceanographic foundation of an “Indo-Pacific” maritime space using contemporary knowledge regarding marine sciences, ethnography, and philology, but also legitimated this area as a social and political space. His main geopolitical idea was, that the emerging anti-colonial (anti-Western) forces of India, China and Southeast Asia would unite with Japan and Germany to break Anglo-American hegemony and change the international order. Thus, right from the beginning, this term “Indo-Pacific” was coined in a geopolitical sense, that means in the relationship between geographical space and political and military power, between the imagined “living space” of nations and the quest of the great powers for domination of strategic areas.

However, a kind of “Indo Pacific” exists. Marine biology and ichthyology do indeed regard the tropical oceans of the Indian Ocean and the Western Central Pacific as a common area of marine species, which means an area stretching from Madagascar until the South Seas and comprising its side oceans as well. Linguists, for their part, stress especially the large Austronesian language family which is to be found from its presumed Urheimat on Taiwan in the North until New Zealand in the South, and from Madagascar in the West until Hawaii in the East (regarded from the Atlantic). Austroasiatic (Mon-Khmer and Munda) languages can be found from Orissa in India until Southern China, with the main area of occurrence in mainland Southeast Asia.

After the end of the Cold War, US President Georges Bush (sen.) constated a very obvious “new world order”, and Secretary of State Warren C. Christopher proclaimed a “new primacy on Asia” (1993, Singapore). Then, Russia struggled to come to terms with its new, diminished role. China’s rise was predictable, and India’s economic reform process had just begun, which carried the possibility, in a more distant future, to follow the Chinese and East Asian models of successfully opening the country for foreign investment and growth through the production of goods for the world market made by qualified and relatively cheap labor. A general hope was there, expressed by Western analysts, that through capitalist development and international trade, the PRC could transform itself, and change politically to resemble Taiwan and the Republic of Korea, and thus would perhaps not become a gigantic neo-authoritarian Singapore, which was seen as the worstcase scenario for the security (or should one say the hegemony) of the US in this part of the world. Melvin Gurtov (born 1941), the long-time ‘China watcher’, expressed these views in 1994, and saw as the only possible counteraction for such a thought

¹ Haushofer’s most prominent student has been in the early 1920s Rudolf Heß. Since 1924, Haushofer had written regular reports about the ‘Indo-Pacific World’ (*Berichte aus der indopazifischen Welt*) in his journal “*Zeitschrift für Geopolitik*.” He was very interested in Japan’s rice, the Far East Policies of Soviet Russia, the future of China, the Pacific Ocean, and the decline of the European colonial powers. He dreamed and speculated about the creation of a Eurasian-Pacific bloc, made of Germany, Soviet Russia, Japan and the former colonies of South- and Southeast Asia, which would jointly stand up against the ‘old powers’ of Western Europe and Northern America.

worst-case scenario a strong US military build-up and the strengthening of its traditional alliance system with Japan, Britain, Australia and New Zealand.²

In those years, Singapore's senior leader Lee Kuan Yew (1923-2015) countered this allegation of neo-authoritarianism and stressed "Asian values" as basis of his country's (and implicitly, China's) success, which were different from "Western (liberal) values". Lee Kuan Yew even expressed "comprehension" for the suppression of the democracy movement in Beijing (1989), as the students had come "fifty years too early".³ Surely to divert attention from China, which he cherished so much, he often expressed his contempt that Japan would again strive to become a superpower like in the Second World War, and would become a nuclear military power indeed⁴, which was then and is now by no means on the agenda of international politics.

Almost thirty years later, we seem exactly at the point described by Melvin Gurtov in 1994. China's GDP is now nearing that of the US (16.6 trillion USD to 22.6, 2020), with a large gap to the following countries (Japan: 5.37, Germany: 4.31, UK: 3.12, India: 3.04, France: 2.93). As far as the GDP/head is concerned, China actually stands at No. 79 (US: 15., Taiwan: 25.). Here, the PRC is still in the same group (more than 11,000 USD/head) with Costa Rica, the Maldives, Russia, and Malaysia. With regard to military expenditures, the PRC is No. 2 (252 bn USD, 2020), far ahead of No. 3 and 4 (India: 72 bn; Russia: 61.7), but still only 39% of the US (778 bn). It might still need some more time before the PRC can be called an equal economic and military rival of the US. The tendencies are clear, however. They seem worrisome, because since Xi Jinping has assumed leadership (2012), the PRC is increasingly and demonstratively flexing its muscles. We might ask if this new arrogance is primarily domestically determined, aimed at preserving the authoritarian CCP regime⁵, or internationally, to demonstrate the increasing great power equality with the US. Whatever it may be, and it might be both, the signs on the wall cannot be dismissed. Currently, three main areas of conflict can be singled out where China is involved: the South China Sea (SCS), the East China Sea (especially the Chinese claim over the uninhabited Senkaku/Diaoyutai islands, situated 170 kms in the north of Taiwan, occupied by Japan since 1895), and the future of Taiwan. Furthermore, there are the conflict on the China-India border and the nuclear threat from the North Korean regime. In the SCS, the PRC has claimed, since 1951, "undisputable sovereignty" according to the crudely drawn Nine Dash Line of self-declared maritime borders, a line, which would override and nullify the economic exploitation zones of the other riparian states and make this sea a Chinese "*mare nostrum*". The fish, seabed and other resources of the SCS

² Gurtov, Melvin. The future of China's rise. In: Asian Perspective, Vol. 18, No. 1, Spring/Summer 1994, pp. 109-128.

³ In an interview, granted in 2007, he somewhat revised these earlier views. He acknowledged, that the Confucian values of his own and his own children's generation had vanished in the generation of his grandchildren. They spoke English better than Chinese and felt and behaved like Westerners. They had become "uprooted", he complained. ("We have left our moorings.") In the same time, he saw this as a chance as well. He predicted: Chinese leaders in 30 years from now (2007) will be very different: Western educated, English speaking, global and realistic. Excerpts from an interview with the New York Times. New York Times, August 19, 2007. Lee Kuan Yew has always expressed comprehension for Chinese Communist leaders.

⁴ Lee Kuan Yew still expressed his contempt about Japan in his 2007 NYT interview. See *ibid.* It could have to do with his personal experiences in the Second World War and the brutal persecutions of Singapore's Chinese by the Japanese occupiers. Similar apprehensions about Germany's 'hegemony' still linger in the minds of several politicians of the European extreme left (e.g. Alexis Tsipras, Yanis Varoufakis, Milos Zeman) or extreme right (Marine Le Pen, Matteo Salvini, Jaroslaw Kaczynski). These emotions can be occasionally roused for the purposes of internal politics.

⁵ Lee Kuan Yew again: "For 5,000 years, the Chinese have believed that the country is safe only when the center is strong. A weak center means confusion and chaos ... Some in the West want to see China become a democracy in the Western tradition. This will not happen ... China is a vast country of 1.3 billion people with a different culture and different history. It will do it its way." Lee Kuan Yew on China. It will do it its way. In: Global Times, July 16, 2021.

would belong to China alone. This line and China's alleged "historic rights" were rejected by a ruling of the Permanent Court on Arbitration (PCA) in The Hague (2016) in accordance with the UN Convention on Law of the Seas (UNCLOS). PRC officials derided the ruling as "null and void". Since 2014, the PRC navy is building heavily fortified artificial islands in the South China Sea, which act like a defense wall around the Spratly group. This activity had been ruled illegal by the PMC ruling. (The Spratlys have not been recognized as islands by the 2016 PMC ruling as well.) Cuarton Reef and Fiery Cross Reef were fortified on the Western side of the Spratlys, Gaven Reef near the centre, Hughs Reef in the North, Johnson West Reef in the Northwest. Mischief Reef (only 250 kilometers off the Philippine coast), was seized by the PRC from the Philippines in 1995, and Subi Reef in the North of the Spratlys, claimed by the Philippines and Vietnam, was occupied by a PRC "fishing fleet" in 2012. What is the goal? Have these military bases been erected to control and eventually block the maritime and aerial passage through the SCS? ASEAN-PRC negotiations on a Code of Conduct (COC) for the SCS are dragging feet because of three main obstacles: Under the cover of the COVID crisis, the PRC continued its bullying activities on the ground, especially against Vietnam and the Philippines. Secondly, the PRC wants to have non-regional countries excluded from the military passage and economic exploitation of the area, which would give the PRC, because of its sheer size, an enormous advantage over the other regional participants. Thirdly, the PRC stubbornly refuses any reference to UNCLOS and the 2016 PCA ruling. Therefore, solutions for a "legally binding" agreement and a conflict management mechanism hang completely in the air. A mandatory mechanism is demanded by ASEAN, but stubbornly rejected by the PRC. Without it, a COC would be teeth- and, by and large, useless.

Since 2017, quite a few "Indo-Pacific strategies" have been presented. Australian political and military circles have discussed "Indo-Pacific" strategies since 1966, the year of Britain's military retreat 'East of Suez' caused by the UK's declining global role and strained finances. In 2017, the Australian government published a White Paper to advance the country's security and prosperity in a changing world, which is mainly influenced by the rise of China. Four main topics were stressed in this paper: disputes are to be solved peacefully according to international law, there shall be open markets for goods, services, capitals and ideas, inclusive economic integration for all countries of this large region, and the protection of the freedom of navigation and overflight as well as the rights of small countries.⁶ Undoubtedly, the SCS conflict and the PRC's outright rejection of the 2016 PCA ruling served as background for these Australian concerns. India's Prime Minister Modi followed with a speech on the occasion of the Shangri La Dialogue in 2018. His views were somewhat different. Modi also stressed a free, open and inclusive region, secure and open seas as well as the rule of international law. He voiced strongly against great power rivalries, protectionism and division. India's Indo-Pacific strategy is, he stressed, inclusive and not directed against anyone. India is connected with East Asia through the Malacca strait and the South China Sea. For him, Southeast Asia was not only geographically, but politically and economically in the center of the Indo-Pacific, and the cornerstone of a future security architecture for the wider region. He hailed ASEAN as a model for regional cooperation and the pivot of any future IndoPacific comprehensive cooperation. Modi stressed, however, India's economic and security partnerships with individual countries: economically with Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia in Southeast Asia, as well as with Japan, the ROK in East Asia, furthermore Australia, New Zealand, and the US. Military relations have developed strongly with Singapore, Vietnam, the US and Japan. Deliberately, he did not name China, but India's military cooperation partners speak volumes. President Trump presented his vision of a "free and open Indo-Pacific" on the APEC CEO meeting in Danang, 2017, as a "place where sovereign and independent nations, with diverse cultures and many

⁶ The Indo-Pacific. Australia's perspective. Speech, delivered by Frances Adamson, Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australian High Commission, Kuala Lumpur, 29 April 2019. In: News, speeches and media. (dfat.gov.au).

different dreams, can all prosper side-by-side, and thrive in freedom and peace”. Trump pounded especially around the question of robust trade relations based on fairness and reciprocity, open markets to an equal degree for both sides, and private investment. He ranted against government run industrial planning, subsidized state industries, product dumping and currency manipulation, especially of China, which he named several times. These goals he wanted to achieve via bilateral trade agreements. The security threats received only a passing sentence.⁷ Secretary of State Mike Pompeo presented the US strategy to his ASEAN colleagues on July 30, 2018, at the occasion of an Indo-Pacific Business Forum. His central clause was the notion of a “free and open” Indo-Pacific. Pompeo’s speech was offensive to China, without naming it, in the way that the US would firmly oppose anybody who would seek domination in the Indo-Pacific.⁸ Except for concrete pledges of infrastructure and cybersecurity aid, worth several billion USD, and surely seen as a compensation for the abolished TTP free trade area, both speakers failed to deliver clear and concise ideas on what kind of a strategy their government had envisioned for the larger Indo-Pacific region. The new Secretary of State Antony Blinken lashed out at China during his visit to India (July) and Japan (March 2021). On both occasions, he especially mentioned Hong Kong, Taiwan, Xinjiang and the SCS. In India, he met the Dalai Lama. China’s reaction was, as expected, furious.⁹ Blinken told his ASEAN colleagues in September 2021, that the new administration will “soon” release a new comprehensive strategy for the wider Indo-Pacific region, against the background of shared values on a “shared vision for a free, open, interconnected, resilient and secure region”.¹⁰ At several occasions (like in Jakarta on December 13, 2021) Blinken stressed “ASEAN centrality” as the core of the regional economic and security architecture and emphasized the strategic partnership with ASEAN as essential for tackling urgent crises and long-term challenges. The long-awaited Paper “Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States” was finally released at February 11, 2022. In the first chapter, China received a prominent treatment as the greatest challenge to the “rules and norms which have benefitted the Indo-Pacific and the world”. The US does not intend to change the PRC, but to shape the strategic environment and build a “balance of influence which is maximally favorable the United States, our allies or partners, and the interests and values we share.” The US is willing to support rules-based approaches to the maritime domain, especially the South China Sea and the East China Sea.¹¹

President Biden, who attended the virtual ASEAN summit in October 2021, declared his willingness to invite ASEAN leaders to a special summit at a later date.¹² The rumored date in January, 2022, passed without a summit. There was also no summit at the official date, released on February 28: March 28-29, 2022. It might be, that Russia’s war in the Ukraine demanded Biden’s full attention.¹³ The meeting finally took place on May 12-13, 2022. The final document (ASEAN-U.S. Special Summit 2022, Joint Vision Statement) is more than a communiqué, and less than a declaration. Interesting is the prominent place of the South China Sea, which covers the whole second paragraph under the header “Promoting Maritime Cooperation”. Neither is China, nor the 2016 PCA Ruling mentioned. However, the 1982

⁷ US Embassy and Consulate in Vietnam. Remarks of President Trump at APEC CEO summit, Ariyana Da Nang Exhibition Center, Da Nang, Vietnam. November 10, 2017. In: vn.usembassy.gov.

⁸ US Mission to ASEAN. Sec. Pompeo’s remarks on “America’s Indo-Pacific Economic Mission”. In: US Mission to ASEAN (asean.usmission.gov).

⁹ Anthony Blinken in India Updates: ‘We view India as a force for good in defence of free, open Indo-Pacific’. In: First Post, July 28, 2021 (firstpost.com).

¹⁰ Blinken says U.S. soon will release new strategy for Indo-Pacific region. In: Reuters, September 23, 2021. (news.yahoo.com).

¹¹ The White House Washington. Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States. February 2022. (www.whitehouse.gov).

¹² Department of State. Office of the Spokes Person. Fact Sheet. Secretary Blinken’s remarks on a Free and Open Pacific. December 13, 2021. (www.state.gov).

¹³ Overly, Stephen/Toosi, Nahal. Biden’s summit with Southeast Asian leaders postponed. In: Politico, 25 March 2022 (www.politico.com).

UNLOS is mentioned four times here, as universal character and legal framework within all activities in the seas, as basis for maintaining peace, security, and stability as well as maritime safety and security in the region, condemning unlawful commercial and military activities, stressing the peaceful resolution of conflicts, and mentioning the Declaration of the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (COC) as basis for a substantial COC mechanism consistent with international law, especially UNCLOS.¹⁴ The Philippines and Vietnam could be happy with this statement, and Cambodia, the most openly pro-Chinese regime in the Southeast Asian region, can surely live with it.

There was another delicate question: who will represent Myanmar on such a summit – the military clique of General Min Hlaung Aing, who came to power after the Coup d'État of February 1, 2021, or the so-called shadow-government in exile of the National League for Democracy (NLD) of the imprisoned elected leader Aung San Suu Kyi.¹⁵ The NLD had, once again since 1988 and 2016, overwhelmingly won the general elections in November 2020.¹⁶ The military's humiliation at the ballot-boxes formed the background of the bloody coup, followed by the international isolation of the military regime. No wonder that several heads of state had difficulties to find a 'proper date' to meet the US President.¹⁷ (Were these countries especially Vietnam and Laos, the steady supporters of Myanmar's junta within ASEAN?)¹⁸ The Joint Vision stressed the ASEAN approach to this crisis: call for the immediate cessation of violence and the release of all political prisoners and detainees, free access to all parties, support of a peaceful solution in accordance with the ASEAN Charter, encouragement of the Special Envoy of the ASEAN Chair on Myanmar and the UN Special Envoy on Myanmar. With regard to Ukraine "and all nations", the respect of the sovereignty, political independence and territorial integrity was stressed and a peaceful solution demanded.¹⁹

There are surely no qualms who is the aggressor and who is the victim, even it was not mentioned directly. This is important for all those countries, like Vietnam (more than 80 percent), Indonesia, and Malaysia who buy weapons in Moscow. Rodrigo Duterte cancelled a 233 mio. helicopter deal with Canada in 2018 and sent his defense minister Delfin Lorenzana to Moscow instead. He ranted: The West always attached conditions to military sales. The new Philippine president Ferdinand Marcos jr. assumed office in June 2022. In August, the government cancelled the deal with Moscow (227 mio. USD, 16

¹⁴ U.S. Mission to ASEAN. ASEAN-U.S. Special Summit 2022, Joint Vision Statement. In: asean.usmission.gov.

¹⁵ The government in exile (National Unity Government of the Union of Myanmar) still represents the country in the UN, and is diplomatically recognized by the US, the UK, France, the Czech Republic, the ROK and Japan. It has also named an ambassador with ASEAN. On the other hand, Russia, China and several Asian countries, like Thailand, Vietnam and Laos, entertain semi-official relations with the military regime (official name: State Administration Council and National Unity Government). However, China did not achieve its goal, that an official representative of the military regime was invited to ASEAN summits.

¹⁶ The NLD gained 258 out of 440 seats in the Lower House or Chamber of Representatives, whereas 110 were appointed by the military without elections. The Union Solidarity and Development Party, close to the military, got only 26 seats, four less than in 2016. The remaining seats went to ethnically based parties, e.g., the Shan National League for Democracy (13). The NDL got 138 out of 224 seats in the Upper House or House of Nationalities, whereas 56 were appointed by the Myanmar military. The USDP got only seven seats here, also four less than in 2016. The 2020 elections were, like in 2016, an outright victory for the NLD and a smashing defeat for the party founded by the military.

¹⁷ US to invite non-political Myanmar representative to summit with ASEAN. In: CNA, 3 March 2022 (www.channelnewsasia.com).

¹⁸ On April 16, 2022, the White House announced, that the official date for the US-ASEAN summit will be May 12-13, 2022. The following topics are on the agenda: economic recovery after COVID, climate change, global security and health, cooperation in the areas of oceans, education, human relations, economic participation, development of human resources. See Nhà Trắng thông báo thời điểm tổ chức Hội Nghị thượng đỉnh Mỹ ASEAN. In Báo Hà Tĩnh Online, 17/04/2022 (www.baohatinh.vn). See also Biden to host rescheduled summit with Southeast Asian leaders. In: Politico, April 16, 2022 (www.politico.com) Officially, neither China nor the conflict in the SCS are on the agenda.

¹⁹ U.S. Mission to ASEAN, op.cit.

helicopters). According to Delfin Lorenzana, Duterte himself has allegedly made this decision in his last days in office because of the fear of US sanctions. Whoever was responsible, it is clear, that the new president of the Philippines repeatedly stressed the importance of the 2016 PCA ruling, sent warships to the South China Sea and renewed strategic relations with the US. China sent his FM Wang Yi to Manila where he participated in negotiations with his ASEAN counterparts. Philippine media stated, that the COC had been negotiated for 15 years, but the negotiations are still not yet over, as progress has been made only in minuscule matters. It seems, that China is likely to expect a tougher stand of the Philippines in the SCS conflict.²⁰

A question arises from all this: What does “ASEAN centrality” mean in practice? Is it an empty word, or has it a meaning? All of these mentioned Indo-Pacific strategies have a common core – the fear of a rising China. The fear, however, seems to appear in different nuances. In the Trump period, the US government predominantly feared the economic rise and attributed it to unfair competition. The military threat was regarded as manageable through the sheer size of American military power. Human rights questions did not appear on the official agenda. It seems, that exactly these issues will be put in the forefront now. Australia feared especially the military rise and the conflict in the SCS, but seemed less concerned about China’s economic power. India’s views on the region appear as the most comprehensive, detailed and nuanced. It goes without saying that all these Indo-Pacific strategies mentioned above are not scientifically objective or academically sound, but based on the perception of national interests of the governments concerned. They are part of their power politics.

Questions for our debate could be: is there a commonly agreed ASEAN strategy, how to deal with this increasing polarization between the US and its partners on the one hand, and China (and Russia as well as other authoritarian countries) on the other? How do regard the individual ASEAN countries the SCS conflict, how do they assess the different Indo-Pacific strategies? Will ASEAN be forced to take sides or what is or could be ASEAN’s contribution to ease the tensions between the emerging power blocs, and especially to manage the conflict in and around the SCS? Are these Indo-Pacific strategies supportive of ASEAN goals and policies, or are they an obstacle, a complication for the solution of the abovementioned problems? Are there any new developments in the Asian-Pacific or “Indo-Pacific” region which are caused by Russia’s war in the Ukraine?

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