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Order(ing) and Agency in the Indo-Pacific: Analytical Issues and the Contributions of this Volume

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Introduction¹

The Indo-Pacific, conceived more as a strategic space rather than a natural geographic entity, has emerged as the world's center of strategic gravity in the last decade or so. The Indo-Pacific has gained prominence through the advocacy of strategic analysts and practitioners, both within and beyond that space, primarily catalyzed by political leaders in Japan and India converging in response to the People's Republic of China (PRC)'s growing assertiveness and shared perceptions of its challenges to the established regional and global order. Following a balance-of-power logic, their strategic response in joining with the United States was to bolster India's aspirations as a pivotal actor within this strategic space, one that was too vast to fall under China's dominance. What began as a rhetorical notion has now become embedded in conventional strategic discourse as it has been adopted by many strategic actors.

Nevertheless, while others, notably China and Russia, have contested and been opposed to the Indo-Pacific's underlying principles, they have had to acquiesce in the ascendancy of the idea of the Indo-Pacific.

The Indo-Pacific has yet to experience significant institutionalization (He and Feng, 2020; Beeson, 2021) or, for that matter, crystallize into a formal framework other than the Quad which brings together Australia, India, Japan and the US, sometimes working in concert with associated partners (ORF and East-West Center, 2024). Nonetheless, the Indo-Pacific as a geostrategic concept has become underpinned by normative values, explicitly manifested in the promotion of a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific'. The implication is that the region should be governed by liberal norms established by like-minded partners, or at least this is how the US and its allies and partners perceive regional order. However, not all Indo-Pacific strategies developed by regional and extra-regional actors in recent years center on strategic competition with China. Among the approaches to be found in the most recent Indo-Pacific strategies, concepts or outlooks, several seek greater inclusivity, emphasizing the necessity of cooperation with all relevant states and non-state partners across multiple domains.

¹Notes :

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The authors of this edited volume are members and associates of the Franco-German Observatory of the Indo-Pacific—an innovative platform for research collaboration, policy dialogue, and knowledge exchange established in 2021. Founded jointly by the Center for International Studies (CERI) at Sciences Po, Paris, and the Hamburg-based German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA), the Observatory has since expanded to include prominent partner institutions in France, such as the Institut national des langues et civilisations orientales (Inalco) and the Fondation pour la Recherche stratégique (FRS). In Germany, researchers of the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP, German Institute for International and Security Affairs) have contributed to Observatory activities like the present volume.

The volume enriches and updates the growing scholarly literature on the international dynamics of the Indo-Pacific that has flourished in recent years. A large part of this literature highlights the intensifying and rapidly evolving great-power competition between China and the United States in this strategic theater (Cannon and Hakata, 2021; Heiduk, 2022; Aggarwal and Kenney, 2023; Kratiuk et al, 2023; Chan and Lee, 2024; Josukutty and Lobo, 2024). Other authors have focused on the emergence of distinct sub-regional dynamics (see e.g. Anwar, 2020; Sudo, Yamahata, 2023; Santarita, 2025). While, overall, a substantial part of the literature draws from various perspectives to focus on US-China strategic rivalry (see most recently Cheng and Li, 2024; Cho 2025; Feng and He, 2025), we approach this competition as a contextual backdrop to explore questions of evolving order and agency in the region.

The volume examines two core aspects of the contemporary Indo-Pacific landscape that are crucial for understanding regional dynamics and ongoing trajectories. On the one hand we explore the contested nature of the meaning and purpose of the Indo-Pacific, resulting in a complex interplay between regional multilateral and minilateral arrangements. On the other, we pay particular attention to the agency of small and middle powers in this strategic space.

The Rise of the Indo-Pacific as a Strategic Framework

The evolution of the term ‘Indo-Pacific’ reflects a profound shift in regional and global strategic thinking. The Indo-Pacific, like other meta-geographical concepts, has emerged within specific historical and political contexts, and, therefore, can be seen as representing a social construction reflecting particular interests and purposes (Lewis and Wigen, 1997). Its constructed and political nature makes the concept inherently contestable. The eminent International Relations scholar of Asia, Amitav Acharya, notes that the evolution of regional designations throughout

history reveals their deeper political underpinnings. The term ‘Far East’ originated from an imperialist perspective, reflecting the colonial powers’ Eurocentric worldview, while ‘Asia’ emerged as a powerful unifying concept embraced by nationalists in pre- and post-World War II China, India, Vietnam, and other nations seeking to gain and assert their independence and identity. Subsequently, the term ‘East Asia’ was given prominence by culturalists emphasizing the region’s distinct civilizational characteristics, while economists later championed the term ‘Asia-Pacific’ to capture the growing economic interdependence and dynamism of the Pacific Rim countries (Acharya, 2024). Shaped primarily by strategic considerations and reflecting contemporary geopolitical realities, the emergence of the ‘Indo-Pacific’ represents the latest evolution in this conceptual lineage. This progression demonstrates how geographic concepts serve as powerful tools that both reflect and shape understandings of regional dynamics according to the prevailing interests and perspectives of their proponents.

Prior to the early twenty-first century, the term was used mainly in oceanographic studies, where it described the habitat of species moving between the Pacific and Indian Oceans. While it is often forgotten, roots of the Indo-Pacific can be found in early 20th century German geopolitics, particularly the 1925 opus of Karl Haushofer (see Li, 2022), the term has more recently emerged as a framing concept in international relations and strategic studies. In 2007, in one of the first articles published on the topic, former Indian Navy Officer, Gurpreet S. Khurana, suggested a the need for a convergence of India and Japan, the region’s two main democracies and normative powers, to oppose China’s rise (Khurana, 2007).² This idea gained momentum when Japan’s then Prime Minister, Shinzō Abe, referred to a ‘confluence of the two seas’ in his 2007 speech before the Indian Parliament. The concept’s ideational and political foundations were thus laid in the mid-2000s. By now, the Indo-Pacific has since appeared in numerous foreign policy documents, including the EU’s Indo-Pacific cooperation strategy (European Commission, 2021) and, as discussed below, the Biden administration’s Indo-Pacific strategy (White House, 2022).

This new strategic framework, invested with a twofold strategic and political meaning, has effectively supplanted the ‘Asia-Pacific’ concept, which characterized an earlier era of accelerated globalization and economic interdependence. While the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum, established in 1989, embodied that period’s emphasis on regional economic integration and growth, the Indo-Pacific captures a fundamentally different reality—

² The most detailed overview of the concept’s usage since the mid-1800s has been provided by Scott (2023).

one shaped by geopolitical and geo-economic dynamics centered on China's rise. Moreover, it seeks to promote a 'free and open' regional environment in opposition to a Sino-centric world order. Conflating both realist and liberal underpinnings the Quad (initially known as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue), which brings together the US, Australia, Japan, and India for dialogues, military exercises, and broader policy cooperation, represents the main institutional manifestation of this new strategic and political thinking.

In the United States, the 'Indo-Pacific' entered the foreign policy lexicon in 2010, foreshadowing the Obama administration's 'pivot' to the region while also building upon the concept's regional origins – and progressively eschewing them. This pivot strengthened strategic relations with India and Australia, while improving ties with secondary powers such as Vietnam. A significant milestone occurred with the Trump administration's 2017 embrace of Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific concept, leading to the adoption of a comprehensive Indo-Pacific national security strategy the following year. The Biden administration's 2022 Indo-Pacific strategy, while maintaining a focus on China's regional influence, departed from its predecessor by emphasizing alliance-building and introducing an Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF). This new framework, unveiled during President Biden's May 2022 Asia visit, positioned itself as a modern alternative to traditional free trade agreements (FTAs). Although it lacked explicit commercial incentives, it carried significant political implications (Forough, 2022).

Notably, the launching of the IPEF came soon after the signing of the September 2021 AUKUS agreement. AUKUS is a landmark security pact between the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia focusing on the latter's acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines and sharing of advanced technology amongst the partners. (Alberque and Schreer, 2021). AUKUS demonstrates America's commitment to countering China's regional ambitions, enhancing Australia's role in US deterrence strategy while accelerating technological cooperation. The UK's participation gives some substance to its 'Indo-Pacific tilt' while potentially securing commercial advantages (Camroux, 2021; Edwards, Yates and Malik, 2022).

Since the late 2010s, the Indo-Pacific concept has gained broader acceptance, with various actors adopting and adapting it to their specific contexts. While initially reluctant to adopt what it perceived as an imported concept reflecting US regional interests, ASEAN, under Indonesia's leadership, formally embraced the term in 2019 through its 'ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific,' seeking to maintain its central role in regional affairs (Anwar, 2020; Nabbs-Keller, 2020). Both the Government of Canada (2022) and that of the Republic of Korea (2022) published strategies on the Indo-Pacific the same year with the latter deeming the region needed

to be free, peaceful and prosperous. European engagement has also intensified, with France—which maintains overseas territories and military assets across both oceans—positioning itself and the European Union (EU) as resident powers in the region since 2018. Subsequently, Germany and the Netherlands developed their own Indo-Pacific strategies in 2020, prefiguring the EU’s comprehensive regional cooperation strategy. Despite the competing demands of the Ukrainian conflict, the Indo-Pacific remained a key priority during France’s and the Czech Republic’s 2022 EU Council presidencies (Graghani, 2022). During its presidency, the Czech Republic published its own Indo-Pacific strategy (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic 2022) followed a year later by Lithuania (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania 2023).³

Indo-Pacific Dynamics

The Indo-Pacific's emergence as a strategic framework both reflects and, in turn, drives complex patterns of international relations in that strategic space that, as Paolo Pizzolo and Stefano Pelaggi argue, encompass a multi-faceted blend of competition, rivalry, cooperation, and opportunism. Given its vast geographic expanse and diversity, the Indo-Pacific is inherently polycentric and ‘a-peripheral,’ making unilateral pursuit of hegemony by any single power both costly and, potentially, unachievable (Pizzolo and Pelaggi, 2023: 40). This reality compels great powers to involve themselves in multilateral and multipolar processes, even as they pursue their strategic interests. Il Hyun Cho (2025: 14) thus cogently argues that the Indo-Pacific can be understood as ‘a site of contestation among the region’s great powers and middle/small powers over proper boundaries and priorities of regional order.’

As mentioned above, the various concepts of the ‘Indo-Pacific’ are each grounded in specific political intentions and interests. The term is never purely descriptive or without connotations, as Felix Heiduk and Gudrun Wacker (2020) have noted. Nick Bisley (2020) argues that the notion of the ‘Indo-Pacific’ serves primarily as a means to organize policy in a climate of geopolitical contestation. The way policymakers conceptualize and define regions

³ Notably absent is any real interest in the Indo-Pacific amongst the countries of the coastal eastern and southern states on the western shores of the Indian Ocean. Neither the African Union, nor individual African countries, have developed an Indo-Pacific strategy or demonstrated an interest in intra-regional dialogue. As Wu and Henwood (2022: 8) argue the African continent ‘remains a part of the region talked about rather than talked to’.

significantly influences resource allocation, high-level attention, security partner prioritization, and the composition and agendas of regional institutions.

A crucial development in recent years has been the way the approaches adopted by both the US and China in their strategic competition seem to have been developed in parallel. As Michael Reiterer (2024) observes, both powers consistently favor establishing their own arrangements, rather than working through existing global institutions, such as the UN or G20. The US has constructed a network of minilateral arrangements, including NATO's Asia-Pacific Four (AP4) outreach, the Five Eyes intelligence network, the Quad and its extensions, AUKUS, and various democracy-focused forums. In parallel, China has launched the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and various BRI supporting institutions. This parallel development of competing frameworks, rather than engagement through established global institutions, is fostering an emerging bifurcation in global political and economic systems.

As this edited volume seeks to highlight, within this evolving landscape, the role of small and middle powers has become increasingly salient. As Tom Long (2022) emphasizes, these states must carefully navigate varying degrees of agency and the constraints and opportunities in their international relationships. The Indo-Pacific presents both opportunities and risks for smaller powers, where concerns about relegation, dependence, or neocolonial vassalization remain significant. To exert agency, states must position themselves as active participants, rather than mere observers, in the changing international order. This raises fundamental questions about how states can actively shape global politics – its order, norms, and relational dynamics – rather than simply reacting to them.

State actors vary significantly in their strategic priorities concerning the Indo-Pacific. For example, Japan has embraced multilateral free trade agreements, while India maintains a more ambivalent stance, and the US adopts an overtly negative position. Nevertheless, they all acknowledge the growing importance of economic and security-related connections between the Pacific and Indian Ocean regions. They also share a common perspective that the Indo-Pacific should not be China-dominated. The question of whether the Indo-Pacific should emerge as a diverse, multipolar space or, rather, one where the US maintains primacy depends largely on the preferences of the respective political establishments in these countries. Moreover, not all states and regional entities employing the terminology of the 'Indo-Pacific' agree that the primary objective is to 'resist' or, at least, to 'contain China. It should be noted that several current Indo-Pacific strategies and visions, including those proposed by the

Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the EU, or New Zealand (Ardern, 2021), adopt a more inclusive approach. This does not echo the exclusionist conceptualization of the Indo-Pacific propagated in Washington under the Biden administration and, it would appear, even more forcefully under the second Trump administration.

While most proponents of the Indo-Pacific concept have, diplomatically, acknowledged the centrality of ASEAN in the regional architecture, in reality there is diminished importance granted to institutions connected to the Association. New arrangements have gained prominence, including multilateral FTAs, such as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for a Trans-Pacific Partnership and the broader, but less ambitious, Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership. Other minilateral initiatives, particularly the Quad and AUKUS, have gained a deal of traction. These minilateral arrangements often focus on balancing China's regional ambitions, both in terms of hard security and in other areas. For example, all four Quad countries along with crucial regional partners have since 2020 increased joint naval exercises in the Indian Ocean (the Malabar Exercise) to demonstrate their collective resolve (Hoang, 2022). In this regard, by dint of its comprehensive mandate, the Quad may serve as a foundation for cooperation among Indo-Pacific nations that share strategic interests and, to some degree, common values.

The Quad members – along with other key external and regional actors, including France, the United Kingdom, the EU or South Korea – clearly view the existing ASEAN-centered arrangements or institutions as being inadequate to address strategic regional challenges. Consequently, they have intensified their bilateral or trilateral relations with individual strategically significant ASEAN member states: Indonesia, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Singapore. Such arrangements, which bring together strategically aligned and well-resourced partners, are focused, either on achieving rapid results, or on signaling shared values and agendas. They have come to represent a lasting feature of the Indo-Pacific's institutional landscape, complementing existing military alliances, given the absence of an overarching, stable and region-wide institutional arrangement.

Analyzing Contested Orders and Agency in the Indo-Pacific

At the core of this edited volume lie the notions of order(ing) and agency in the Indo-Pacific. Order remains one of the essentially contested concepts in the social sciences (see Tang 2016 for a conceptual discussion). In the International Relations (IR) literature, different schools emphasize varying aspects of order – from a realists focus on the distribution of military and other material capabilities in the international system, to a constructivist and liberal

institutionalist emphasis on rules and norms that are expected to serve as guideposts for managing inter-state behavior and relations. In practice, such factors are intertwined as the legitimacy, implementation and development of norms and rules is shaped – and backed up – by shifting power relations over time at the global and regional levels.

Huiyun Feng and Kai He (2020: 12) have offered an integrative definition of international order as ‘a normative and institutional arrangement among sovereign states that governs their interactions in the power-based international system.’ Their theoretical framework distinguishes three levels, each prone to potential order change or transitions. The first of these are normative foundations (fundamental principles, including sovereignty and non-intervention). Secondly, they underline the importance of material power distribution and the resulting power structures (unipolarity/hegemony, bipolarity, multipolarity). Finally, they emphasize the importance of institutional frameworks that provide the architecture of a ‘rules-based order’ (international law, organizations, and conventions). In all three areas, transitions can occur – at the normative level (‘systems transitions’), in terms of power distribution (‘systemic transition’), or in institutional terms (‘institutional transition’) (Feng and He, 2020: 15–8). As Feng and He (2020: 14) note, international order can be conceptualized across both issue areas (security, politics, economy) and in terms of geographical dimensions (global to local, with regions in between). The Indo-Pacific exemplifies such regional scaling. As we have argued above, these regions are not natural entities but, rather, social constructs reflecting particular aims and interests. As such, in the case of the Indo-Pacific not only can regions themselves – sometimes doubling as strategic spaces as – be contested, the orders they represent are also called into question. Ordering is then a process of contestation in which narratives about (desired) orders are promoted by intra- and extra-regional actors who may back up such narratives through institutional investment and the provision of public goods in order to garner support for their conceptions of order.

Within such a framework, the term ‘agency’ emerges as a crucial concept for understanding how states navigate the Indo-Pacific landscape. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* defines agency most generally as ‘the property or capacity of actors to make things happen.’ In an IR understanding, this ‘capacity to act’ is both manifested and transformed through practices, performances and networks (Braun, Schindler and Wille, 2019). In a similar vein, Jaeyoung Kim (2024: 7) defines agency as a ‘state’s capability to deploy material and/or discursive resources to achieve a particular goal.’ In respect to small powers, Long (2022: 23) emphasizes such states’ ‘ability to articulate their identity and interests and to make meaningful (though not unfettered) choices about how to pursue those interests.’ All of these definitions converge on

the central ability/capacity dimension of agency, but they also point to different analytical foci (contexts, practices and outcomes) that can be brought to bear when, not only using the concept but, also, applying it to concrete situations.

In the context of strategic competition and related (re)orderings in the Asia/Indo-Pacific and beyond, middle and small powers actively seek to exert agency, although their strategic postures vary significantly. While middle powers cannot by themselves independently determine great power strategies, they can significantly influence their effectiveness (Abbondanza, 2022). While they may not match great powers in capacity, they can exert considerable impact on the international system, particularly at the regional level. This is especially the case when great powers do not take the lead (Nagy, 2022).

Some middle powers that are also regional powers, such as Japan, and aspiring great powers, such as India, actively engage in building security links among themselves through various channels. These can be bilateral, in concert with the US, or through minilateral arrangements with middle powers such as Australia. Other middle powers such as Indonesia, South Korea or Singapore have not engaged in overt balancing moves but prefer to hedge, reflecting their specific circumstances and distinct policy choices. Another group of Indo-Pacific middle powers – Australia, India, and Japan – have become increasingly involved in minilateral arrangements, epitomized by the Quad, or the various trilaterals that have emerged in the region over the past few years. While minilateralism—defined as relatively exclusive, informal, and functional groupings comprising a minimal number of states gathered around specific policy agendas or values (Singh and Teo, 2020)—is not new in international relations, it has gained prominence in the Indo-Pacific. Minilateral arrangements have clearly become elements in strategic competition (Envall et al, 2024; Wilkins et al, 2024; He and Feng, 2025). What is less clear is whether the newer minilaterals in the Indo-Pacific effectively undermine existing multilateral settings, especially those connected to ASEAN, or whether they complement, and perhaps even reinvigorate, longer-established multilateral structures (Hoang, 2022; Panda and Ohn, 2024).

Smaller powers also seek to exert agency and, to some extent, have leveraged their involvement in Indo-Pacific competition to support their strategic choices. In the context of intensified strategic competition, both China and the US (along with their allies and partners) have increased their attention and resources toward engaging these small powers. This engagement has involved both foreign policy initiatives and comprehensive connectivity schemes like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), as well as bilateral arrangements. Compared to middle powers, let alone great powers, small powers possess significantly less capacity and

capabilities in the economic, military, and other spheres. Faced with substantial security challenges, small powers occupy a weaker position in asymmetric relationships with limited diplomatic power. They also remain vulnerable to external shocks and economic coercion. Nevertheless, small powers often develop strategies to cope with, and compensate for, their material weaknesses. These strategies include forming alliances with other small powers or stronger states, carefully prioritizing the use of their limited resources, or developing sophisticated organizational approaches to maximize their influence. Some small powers have also sought to overcome their material constraints by focusing intensively on key asymmetric relationships or by developing ‘niche’ diplomatic expertise in specific issue areas (Allès, 2016; Baldacchino and Wivel 2020; Jones and Jenne, 2022; Barston 2024 [1972]).

Amidst growing US-China competition in the Indo-Pacific, most small and medium powers have resisted exclusive alignments but, rather, have signaled their preference for a ‘middle road’ or a ‘third way.’ Some have strategically leveraged their position within an environment of great-power competition to advance their national interests and subregional agendas. This is exemplified by the Pacific Island countries’ ‘Blue Pacific’ strategic narrative and vision. However, critical longer-term questions emerge. Firstly, how sustainable and effective are such efforts in the face of escalating strategic competition? Secondly, can strategic competition lead to longer-term benefits in terms of the provision of public goods in the Indo-Pacific (and various subregions thereof) (see Feng and He, 2025). Thirdly, to what extent can small and middle powers in the region successfully assert their own national and regional priorities, impacting in the process of (re)ordering the Asia-/Indo-Pacific? The contributions to this volume analyze the drivers and manifestations of strategies pursued by regional powers such as Australia, Japan, and India; and smaller powers like the Philippines, Vietnam, and Pacific Island Countries; as well as France and Germany, the first EU countries to develop comprehensive Indo-Pacific strategies. A final chapter analyses what Chinese experts make of the evolving strategic dynamics in the Indo-Pacific.

The Contributions to this Volume

The volume opens with Felix Heiduk’s analysis of the ‘Indo-Pacific Interregnum.’ Drawing on Gramscian concepts, he examines the crisis of US hegemony in Asia and a concomitant potential transition to an emerging regional order where China, while playing a crucial role, is not the sole decisive actor. The chapter highlights the sites and agents where contestation of the Indo-Pacific construct have emerged. Heiduk shows that such contestation has materialized not only from, and within, China but also from within the United States, as well as from US allies

and some so-called like-minded partners. These elements suggest not only the inexistence of a consensus on ‘the’ Indo-Pacific’s purpose and meaning, but, also that this is part of a wider ‘crisis of authority.’

In examining the complex relationship between multilateral and minilateral arrangements in the Indo-Pacific region, Delphine Allès and Thibault Fournol then challenge conventional wisdom which opposes these two formats of cooperation. While the Indo-Pacific concept has disrupted traditional patterns of regional initiative historically built around ASEAN, the chapter shows that multilateralism and minilateralism have often co-evolved in the region, rather than competed with one another. Their study distinguishes two types of minilateral arrangements: ‘operational’ formats that enable flexible cooperation among willing partners who are otherwise involved in multilateral arrangements, and ‘political’ formats that serve strategic signaling functions. In the context of intensified external diplomatic investments and expectations in the Indo-Pacific, the proliferation of such arrangements and their increasing politicization, has led, firstly, to the saturation of agendas. Moreover, secondly, the dispersion of resources potentially weakens pre-existing deliberative spaces and fulfilling comprehensive security objectives. The chapter argues that strengthening the regional security architecture requires optimal integration of these different cooperative formats while, at the same time, preserving the (relative) autonomy of regional partners.

Mohammadbagher Forough's contribution seeks to expand our analytical perspective to go beyond China-centric approaches and the BRI. His work departs from conventional literature that tends to address Indo-Pacific relations through the lens of geopolitics (e.g. the Quad and Taiwan crisis) and ‘obstructive geoeconomics’ (e.g. sanctions and tariffs) aimed at reducing connectivity. Instead, he focuses on the much-understudied area of ‘constructive geoeconomics’ that promotes increased connectivity through initiatives and trade agreements driving contemporary economic globalization. Forough defines geographic agency as the active processes through which an actor both produces ideational representations of its geography in the world and, also, implements specific policies to provide a material reality to that geography. The chapter maps competing geo-narratives (defined as historically grounded narratives that shape specific transnational, civilizational, or global geographies) which attempt to define the world's new geographic center. These range from the ‘Global South’ to the ‘Indo-Pacific.’ Forough highlights the latter concept’s limited geoeconomic substance. Though the US (and allied actors) have sought to provide a geographic name (‘the Indo-Pacific’) – and define its governing ‘rules’ and ‘order’ – they have not sought to enter into major new trade deals in that newly invented geographic space. Forough cogently argues for the need to analyze geo-

narratives as a prerequisite to understanding global reordering. He argues for the need to bring to bear multiple geographical and historically informed perspectives.

In her chapter devoted to ‘Australia, Japan, and a ‘Greater AUKUS,’ Guibourg Delamotte analyzes how the Indo-Pacific's international security architecture is being reshaped. She demonstrates that the AUKUS agreement – signed in September 2021 between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States – serves multiple purposes. These go beyond addressing Australia’s immediate and medium-term China-related security concerns. The pact creates opportunities for project-based partnerships with other nations while ensuring the core members can develop and access cutting-edge technologies. While AUKUS has garnered bipartisan political support in Australia, as it has in the UK and the US, public criticism has exposed differing perspectives on Australia's security interests. Using a middle-power agency analytical framework, the chapter highlights the fact that, while the agreement potentially enhances Australia's capabilities, it also creates a dependency on its American and British partners. Japan, however, benefits strategically from the arrangement without any formal commitments, as AUKUS strengthens the relationships among three of its key allies and partners, thereby, indirectly at least, advances Japan's security objectives.

The volume continues with a co-authored chapter by Nicolas Blarel, Thibault Fournol, Raphaëlle Khan and Isabelle Saint-Mézard. In their analysis of ‘India in the Indo-Pacific: Ordering at the Margins,’ they examine how, amid intensifying US-China competition, India navigates its role in the Indo-Pacific through an exercise in strategic balancing. The authors demonstrate how India leverages its geographic, economic, and political weight while pursuing a dual strategy: maintaining pragmatic partnerships with the US and its allies while asserting its autonomy within a US-led regional framework. The chapter analyzes India's approach at multiple levels. These range from subregional initiatives in the Bay of Bengal and Northwest Indian Ocean, to its Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative, and, ultimately, to its broader positioning as the leading voice of the Global South. However, the authors highlight how resource constraints, as well as inconsistent support in New Delhi, create challenges for India in effectively shaping the Indo-Pacific amid evolving geopolitical dynamics.

David Camroux and Tran Bang’s chapter examines Vietnam and the Philippines as case studies to illustrate ‘Neorealist/Liberal Internationalist Actorship and Middle Power Agency in the Indo-Pacific.’ Beginning with an analysis of Vietnam's 2023 Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with the US and the Philippines' emergence as Washington's ‘new star ally’ under President Marcos Jr., the authors develop a framework for understanding middle power agency. They argue that different forms of middle power agency emerge from the interaction of three

indigenous factors and two exogenous factors. The indigenous factors, they argue, are geography, capabilities, and public opinion in relation to regime type, while the two exogenous factors are US and Chinese behavior and the role of ASEAN.

In his chapter on ‘Small Powers Navigating Strategic Competition in the Indo-Pacific: Conceptual Perspectives and Evidence from Pacific Island Countries,’ Patrick Köllner shows how the Pacific Islands region has morphed into a strategic theater since the late 2010s. Pacific Island Countries (PICs) have benefited from that competition in the region to the extent that they have been able to leverage the growing interest of both China and traditional powers. This leveraging has enabled them to pursue their individual and collective interests. The empirical evidence, he argues, suggests that the PICs are not mere pawns in a geostrategic chess game played by bigger powers. Rather, they do exert agency in dealing with the latter. However, asymmetric power relations also entail risks and may lead to dependencies of both a temporary and/or structural nature. The chapter also discusses whether and how conceptual approaches in IR may help to, both better explain and understand the dynamics playing out in the region and, also, the foreign policies pursued by the small powers involved. He demonstrates that the concepts of agency, alignment, and to some extent hedging, better explain PIC behavior than the notions of alliances, ‘bandwagoning’ and balancing.

In their examination of European engagement with the Indo-Pacific, Christophe Jaffrelot and Johannes Plagemann analyze whether a ‘third way’ between China and the United States really exists. The chapter argues that European member states – and the EU itself – have enthusiastically adopted the terminology of the Indo-Pacific, thereby signaling a sense of strategic alignment with the US vis-à-vis China. They demonstrate how the Western powers have been anxious to preserve a liberal order in the region, including the right of freedom of navigation. However, to varying degrees, Europeans have simultaneously cultivated their own agency by emphasizing their differences from the US and by responding to agency expectations from small and medium powers in the region. They do so by offering alternative forms of cooperation with Indo-Pacific states and by positioning themselves as outside the realm of deepening US–China rivalry. Through a detailed analysis of French, German, and EU policies on the Indo-Pacific, the authors highlight, both intra-European divergences, as well as emerging policy convergences amongst the EU’s leading powers.

The volume concludes with Jérôme Doyon and Mathieu Duchâtel’s analysis of Chinese perspectives on the Indo-Pacific strategies pursued by others. Chinese expert views on the Indo-Pacific are generally overlooked and, at the best, dismissed. By taking seriously this Chinese expert literature, the authors reveal the nuanced debates within Chinese policy circles about a

construct, widely portrayed as an effort to contain China's rise. While the dominant perspective among Chinese analysts frames the Indo-Pacific as representing a 'NATO-ization of the Asia-Pacific,' other experts emphasize the diversity of Indo-Pacific strategies adopted by various countries from Asia to Europe. As a consequence, these Chinese experts suggest the need for broadening China's policy options and developing more nuanced responses to regional dynamics.

Overall, this edited volume shows how the 'Indo-Pacific' concept captures a vast and contested strategic space, shaped by intertwined geopolitical and geo-economic dynamics, as well as by transnational challenges like pandemics and climate change. What happens in this economic and strategic center of gravity is of vital interest, not only to regional actors, but also to powers with global interests. While US-China relations and power transitions have fundamentally shaped – and will continue to re-shape – the international order and strategic environment in that space, the Indo-Pacific is increasingly impacted upon by the agency of diverse actors. These actors are pursuing their interests through complex multiple channels which manifest in the proliferation of overlapping cooperation formats. These range from established multilateral institutions to emerging minilateral arrangements. Looking ahead, both competition and cooperation will likely characterize interactions in areas ranging from defense and security to economic connectivity, as well as from cultural engagement to climate action. A key challenge will, therefore, be to develop inclusive frameworks that can accommodate this diversity, while, at the same time, maintaining regional stability and addressing shared challenges.

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