

# Perspectives on Africa's Position and Role in the Evolving Indo-Pacific

**Yu-Shan Wu and Roland Henwood**

Department of Political Sciences, University of Pretoria

<https://doi.org/10.35293/srsa.v44i2.4416>

The past decade and a half, ever since former Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe's 'Confluence of the Two Oceans' speech in front of the Indian parliament in August 2007, has seen the rapid evolution of the concept 'Indo-Pacific', a clear shift from what had been, since the 1990s, an emphasis on the 'Asia Pacific'. From a global North perspective, the turn to the Indo-Pacific is a recognition of the growing importance of the Indo-Pacific in the global economy, as well as a concerted effort to address, if not counter, the rise of China and its growing global influence. Recently, a spate of countries and regional organisations have released Indo-Pacific strategies or policies, a clear indication of their awareness of the importance of this geographical area in the global political and economic terrains.

Observing, researching, and teaching this evolution of what is, at first glance, a new concept in geopolitics and geostrategy from an African perspective brought to our attention the need to assess the way in which Africa, at the very least coastal East and Southern Africa as well as island states, are situated and perceived in these approaches and strategies. Africa, after all, forms the Western 'outpost' of the Indo-Pacific, at least from a purely geographical perspective, and the Suez Canal and the Strait of Bab el-Mandeb are two of the best known maritime 'chokepoints', being of huge importance in transporting global cargo, especially oil and gas, between the Indo-Pacific and the Mediterranean (and, by extension, the 'greater' West). Furthermore, piracy off the Horn of Africa has garnered international attention and global cooperation in an effort to fight this scourge, whilst the growing importance of natural gas in the sea off Northern Mozambique to Europe, and the vulnerability of the Mozambique channel as a potential choke point in the context of sea-borne insurgency, have started to draw attention to Africa's position and role in the Indo-Pacific's Western Indian Ocean region. Entangled in the mix is the presence, implicitly or explicitly, of the BRICS formation, with China, India, and South Africa integral to the Indo-Pacific.

In early 2021, a small group of researchers in the Department of Political Sciences at the University of Pretoria began studying the evolving Indo-Pacific and the way in

which actors external to Africa conceive of Africa's position and role in the region. They convened two roundtable discussions on this topic in November 2021 and March 2022, also involving researchers and scholars from India, Indonesia, Australia, the EU, and the UK, embassy staff from some of the countries in the Indo-Pacific region, and South African maritime and foreign policy experts. This special issue of the *Strategic Review for Southern Africa* contains a number of articles interrogating the way in which the Indo-Pacific is conceived in the growing number of strategies and approaches to the region, with a focus on the way in which Africa is situated or perceived (if at all) in these public documents. Regrettably it is not possible to provide a comprehensive set of such perspectives, given the large number of countries and organisations focusing increasingly on the importance of the Indo-Pacific. What is offered in this issue is a small number of specialised analyses of the strategies of India, the EU, and China, representing some of the most important actors in this evolving ocean region.

This issue opens with an article by Schoeman and Wu, exploring the Indo-Pacific as a regional security complex. Their analysis includes references to the approaches and strategies of Indonesia, ASEAN, the US, and Russia, and also provides a brief historical overview of the concept 'Indo-Pacific', pointing out that it is not, as often dealt with in contemporary literature, a 'new' construct but one with a history going back more than a century, and one that has, apart from a hard military and political security content, also a strong developmental foundation, as captured in the rationale for the establishment of the Indian Ocean Rim Association in 1997. The article also explores the role of political geography in the Indo-Pacific as the physical boundaries of this mega-region remain open to interpretation.

Bhatia's article on India's Indo-Pacific perspective focuses in particular on the Western Indo-Pacific. Although India's strategy encompasses the whole of the Indo-Pacific, Bhatia makes it clear that there is, for India, a distinction between the 'Indo' and 'Pacific' sub-regions, making for a kind of segmented approach to the macro-region. Yet, in sharp contrast to several other Indo-Pacific strategies, India views Eastern and Southern Africa, including Africa's Indian Ocean island states, as an integral part of its strategy and India-Africa relations as crucial to India's role as a regional power. Although India's focus in the eastern Indo-Pacific is very much determined by China's conduct in that region, Bhatia concedes that India's western Indo-Pacific approach is also entangled in its competition with China for influence in the region.

In their article, Mattheis and Diaz provide an analysis of the strategies and

approaches of the EU, both as an organisation and of some of its leading members in the maritime domain, viz., France, Germany, and the Netherlands, to the evolving Indo-Pacific. What their article illustrates is the growing geopolitical and strategic importance attached to this region as, strictly speaking, these are actors external to the Indo-Pacific. France presents an interesting exception because the island of Reunion is considered a ‘department’ of France, the French have retained a role in the Indian Ocean and have ensured a measure of acceptance and permanence as an ‘Indian Ocean actor’, confirmed by its admittance as a permanent member of IORA in 2020. Nevertheless, as the authors point out, there is considerable divergence in the approaches and strategies of the EU and individual EU states with respect to Africa and these approaches concede little agency to African actors.

In rather stark contrast to the above articles, Wu and Alden’s analysis of China’s ‘alternate gaze’ towards the Indo-Pacific emphasises the extent to which the Quad has been appropriating the construct ‘Indo-Pacific’ as a way of containing (or attempting to contain) the rise of China – populating or conceptualizing the construct in such a way that it excludes China and serves to bolster Quad power and influence in this region. Wu and Alden do point out though, that the contours and future of the construct are still fluid and left open for interpretation and that China, after its initial heavy opposition to the use of and reference to the ‘Indo-Pacific’, seems to have started to accept it in some ways. What does make China different from the other actors covered in the articles in this issue is the fact that Africa is very much a part of China’s conception of the Western Indo-Pacific region in geographical terms with a measure of agency or at the very least recognition granted to Africa within China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), including its maritime dimension, as well as in other forums in which China interacts with the continent, such as Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC).

The articles in this journal explicitly or implicitly critique or emphasise the fact that no matter how important the Indo-Pacific has become in geopolitics and strategy, Africa as constituting the Western Indo-Pacific remains rather on the margins of the debates, conversations, policies, approaches, and strategies of the big powers involved in the evolution of this region. The continent, or its eastern and south-eastern coastline and ocean states, may be mentioned in these concepts of this vast ocean region, but even then there is little evidence of it being perceived as an important player – it remains a part of the region talked about, rather than talked to. The question about Africa’s position and role in the Indo-Pacific does not only speak to the approach and strategies of actors external to the continent. Africa and its eastern coastal and Indian

Ocean island states, need to exercise actorly qualities. The extent to which this is the case will be the focus of a follow-up special issue of this journal.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

Finally, the editors acknowledge the support of the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIHSS) to the research project, ‘Seeing the Sea: Promoting BRICS maritime cooperation for sustainable development and security in Africa,’ of which this special issue of *Strategic Review* is part.