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Análisis

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De Asia-Pacífico al Indo-Pacífico a la luz de tres (cosmo)visiones distintas

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Abstract

There is a sense of *déjà vu* in the recent Indo-Pacific talk. Twenty years into the twenty-first century, after the interlude of the (us) "unipolar moment", Asia-Pacific seems to have metamorphosized into the Indo-Pacific, an even vaster expanse. But are we correct in presuming the latest regional construct? Without denying the possibility that it might turn out a useful notion, based on the experience of the Asia-Pacific idea in this article I question the current furor around the Indo-Pacific concept. I probe how the Indo-Pacific region could come into being from three different International Relations (IR) perspectives: realism, liberalism, and constructivism. The article is divided into five sections: in the first one I begin by recapping the origins and reach of the Asia-Pacific concept, and then I proceed to trace the origins of the more recent one, Indo-Pacific. In the three following sections I briefly review the three analytical perspectives mentioned (realism, liberalism, and constructivism) in turn, looking at how they would account for the (potential) emergence of the Indo-Pacific. The final section recapitulates and presents some concluding remarks.

Keywords: Indo-Pacific, Asia-Pacific, constructivism, liberalism, realism.

Resumen

Hay una sensación de *déjà vu* en la reciente discusión sobre el Indo-Pacífico. A veinte años del inicio del siglo XXI, después del interludio del "momento unipolar", Asia-Pacífico parece haberse metamorfoseado en el Indo-Pacífico, una extensión aún más vasta. Pero, ¿estamos en lo cierto al suponer la última construcción regional? Sin negar la posibilidad de que pueda resultar una noción útil, basándome en la experiencia de la idea de Asia-Pacífico en este artículo, cuestiono el furor actual en torno al concepto del Indo-Pacífico. Investigo cómo la región del Indo-Pacífico podría surgir desde tres perspectivas diferentes de relaciones internacionales (RI): realismo, liberalismo y constructivismo. El artículo se divide en cinco secciones: en la primera comienzo recapitulando los orígenes y el alcance del concepto Asia-Pacífico, y luego procedo a rastrear los orígenes del más reciente, Indo-Pacífico. En las tres secciones siguientes reviso brevemente las tres perspectivas analíticas mencionadas (realismo, liberalismo y constructivismo) sucesivamente, analizando cómo explicarían el (potencial) surgimiento del Indo-Pacífico. La sección final es una recapitulación y se presentan algunas observaciones finales.

Palabras clave: Indo-Pacífico, Asia-Pacífico, constructivismo, liberalismo, realismo.

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There is a sense of *déjà vu* in the recent Indo-Pacific talk.[2] The (illusory) referent is, of course, Asia-Pacific. Coined in the late 1900s, the term became a buzzword in both the academic and popular literatures of the decades prior to what was supposed to be the Pacific Century. Twenty years into the twenty-first century, after the interlude of the (US) "unipolar moment", Asia-Pacific seems to have metamorphosized into the Indo-Pacific, an even vaster expanse. Some analysts and policymakers have explicitly acknowledged that the Indo-Pacific has replaced Asia-Pacific (Clinton, 2011; Government of Australia, 2013a, p. 30; Medcalf, 2018, p. 1). Both terms (Asia-Pacific and Indo-Pacific) are of course consistent with Friedrich Hegel's notion that the "spirit of civilization" moves around the world, and with Karl Haushofer's pre-World War II ideas about the geopolitical importance of the area (Coker, 2003, p. 33; Wirth, 2019, p. 493). A recent monograph pointed to the "ineluctable geo-economic integration" that will take place within the purported region and ventured that "It's where the future of the world will be determined" (Coker, 2003, p. 33; Wirth, 2019, p. 493). More importantly, though, the latest incarnation of the idea also harbors hope that the emergence of the Indo-Pacific will contribute to bring about greater order and prosperity to world affairs (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2007; Híjar-Chiapa, 2018). As Michael Richardson put it, by becoming "more cohesive, economically and politically", the Indo-Pacific has the potential to serve as a "buffer against instability and a magnet for investment and progress" (Richardson, 2005, p. 365).

But are we right to assert the existence of the Indo-Pacific, or do we find ourselves in a situation similar to the one described in the well-known joke about the physicist, the engineer and the economist stranded in a desert island, with the latter suggesting that they simply assume a can opener, so they can eat from the tin they found? That is, are we correct in presuming the latest regional construct? Without denying the possibility that it might turn out a useful notion, based on the experience of the Asia-Pacific idea in this article I question the current furor around the Indo-Pacific concept. I probe how the Indo-Pacific region could come into being from three different International Relations (IR) perspectives: realism, liberalism, and constructivism. At times it would seem that IR scholars of said analytical inclinations

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do indeed agree that the Indo-Pacific would contribute to increase a sense of order in international politics. However, the three perspectives would disagree on the mechanisms by means of which the Indo-Pacific could improve the current state of affairs. That is, the three approaches would put forward different kinds of regions in the Indo-Pacific; unlike Justice Potter Stewart, IR scholars do not simply "know when they see" a region—they actually think of it in different ways, that is, they see it differently.

However, to foreshadow my conclusions, the theoretical perspectives under consideration do have something in common when theorizing about region-building: to some extent or another, they all rely on a variant of the notion of "constructed focal points" as enablers of coordination—be it of security strategies (realism), of economic integration (liberalism), or of social interaction (constructivism; Cooper, 2019; cf. Weingast, 1995, p. 450; Schelling, 1989/1960. Each approach could be said to have a "comparative advantage" in dealing with at least one of the "layers" Medcalf refers to when discussing what the "narrative of the Indo-Pacific" implies; cf. Medcalf, 2019, p. 5). If to different degrees, the three approaches postulate some level of institutionalization if a region is to come into existence.

Thus, unrushed consideration of the three analytical viewpoints shows that the optimism in vogue is unwarranted. IR theory does not take regions for granted. In the case at hand, from a realist, liberal, or constructivist vantage point, the Indo-Pacific does not appear—at least up to now—as a focal point but rather as a fuzzy prospect; in its reminiscences to the "Asia-Pacific region", it seems, as Yogi Berra would have put it, "*déjà vu* all over again."

The rest of the article is divided into five sections: in the first one I begin by recapping the origins and reach of the Asia-Pacific concept, and then I proceed to trace the origins of the more recent one, Indo-Pacific. In the three following sections I briefly review the three analytical perspectives mentioned (realism, liberalism, and constructivism) in turn, looking at how they would account for the (potential) emergence of the Indo-Pacific. The realist account is longer than the other two, as it has been on this understanding that the new regionalist discourse has gained more traction. The final section recapitulates and presents some concluding remarks.

1. From Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific

As noted, the concept of the Indo-Pacific is a variation on an old idea.[3] Thus, for instance, in 1900 US Secretary of State John Hay wrote: "the Mediterranean is the ocean of the past, the Atlantic the ocean of the present and the Pacific is the ocean of the future" (in McGee and Watters, 1997, p. 4). Eight decades later US President Ronald Reagan referred to the twenty-first century as "the Pacific's century", and in 1993 Bill Clinton called for the creation of a "community of the Pacific" (Department of State, 1984, p. 18; Kohona, 1986, p. 399; Ravenhill, 2001, p. 94). But, as Barry Buzan has noted, "If we are to consider this huge expanse as a region, then we must identify what ties it together sufficiently to justify differentiating it from the rest of the international system" (Buzan, 1998, p. 69). That is, what could hold such an intangible community in that large geographic area, one that an analyst compared to Pascal's sphere, "with periphery indeterminable and a center that might be anywhere?" (Dirlik, 1992, p. 55; cf. Emmerson 1984 for a similar argument regarding the construction of "Southeast Asia").

A few years Clinton's call for the creation of the Pacific's network, the US Congress had held Hearings devoted to find an answer to such question; the name of the Hearings was telling of Washington's yearnings: "The Idea of the Pacific Community." US legislators and the invited experts started their work based on the "central premise that the United States is a Pacific nation and its future is inextricably bound with the future of the Asia-Pacific region" (USHR, 1979a, p. 1). But as one participant noted, "Certainly the very concept of a Pacific community is very much in the early stages of both theoretical planning and practical association building", and for that reason what was required was "a kind of *creative ambiguity* in our use of Pacific community" (USHR, 1979b, p. 100; my italics). Thus, by the time of the US 42nd call for a community of the Pacific, when talk about the global triumph of the market and the end of history were the order of the day (Fukuyama, 1990), free trade was thought to be the cement that would hold together Asia-Pacific, as the vast geographic area came to be called.[4] Significantly, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum (APEC), became the embodiment of this ambitious

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3.   In this section I draw on Santa-Cruz 2003.
4.   Although it was also frequently referred to as the Pacific Rim (Ravenhill, 2001, p. 233).

enterprise; even more tellingly, it is not nation states, but "economies", that are APEC's constituent parties (Rüland, Manske and Draguhn, 2002, p. xii).

Established in Canberra in 1989, APEC ended up comprising the Eastern shore of the Pacific—something that did not figure in the original plans, in which this geographic area was excluded. Its 12 founding members (Australia, Brunei, Canada, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Thailand, and the United States) embarked on a project whose objective was, according to the first principle, approved at the inaugural meeting, "to sustain the growth and development of the region, and in this way to contribute to the growth and development of the world economy."[5] From the get-go, APEC's avowed way of reaching its goal was "open regionalism", that is, that trade liberalization should take place through a voluntary process of unilateral measures applied equally to members and non-members of the organization. Soon after, though, the primacy of free trade within the forum started to be questioned. Thus, in 1995 a senior official at Japan's Ministry of Finance bluntly declared: "The Americans are wrong to regard APEC as being primarily about trade" (in Ravenhill, 2001, p. 100). Already in 1993 Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans had noted about the transpacific forum: "APEC is just four letters in search of a noun" (in Balzar, 1993; also in Bisley, 2012, p. 350).

If the economy-centered, emblematic organization of "Asia-Pacific" seemed to had lost it *raison d'être* relatively soon, it is not surprising that it failed to make inroads in the more ambitious aspects of region building, such as commonality of wider, political interests or a sense of shared identity. As Manuel Castells noted at the dawn of the twentieth century: "A Pacific region does not exist as an integrated or distinct entity" (Castells, 1999, p. 339). Similarly, Dirlik argued around the same time that Asia-Pacific's very meaning remained "unclear" (Dirlik, 1998, p. 3). By 2007 one of the foremost experts on APEC, John Ravenhill, was writing about the forum's "demise", and in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, C. Fred Bergsten—who had been part of APEC's Eminent Persons Group tasked with articulating "a vision for trade in the Asia-Pacific region"— noted that the forum had "failed to adopt leadership positions on any of the key issues facing the region and the world economy" (APEC, 1993, p. 8; Ravenhill, 2007; Voigt, 2009, p. 1/3). Similarly, around 2010 there were doubts in Washington about the geopolitical value of APEC,

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5.   In Santa-Cruz, 2003, pp. 13-14; membership reached its current number of 21 in 1998.

as the institution's "symbolic and ideational significance" was proving rather limited; it thus became clear that at the start of what was supposed to be the Pacific Century Asia-Pacific as a political region had not materialized either (Martin, 2010, p. 21; Beeson & Breslin, 2014, p. 114; Beeson, 2018, p. 92).

However, Asia-Pacific's replacement, Indo-Pacific, had already begun to emerge by that time. As one of its main proponents has noted, "The map of Asia is being reimagined. The idea of the Asia-Pacific, which made good sense as a framework for regional order in the late twentieth century, is giving way to another construct: the Indo-Pacific" (Medcalf, 2018, p. 1). Once again, a sense of uneasiness might have contributed to the reemergence of the idea that authority is moving away from the dominant powers of the modern state system. As the organizers of the Munich Security Conference –the most important of its kind– put it in its 2020 report: "Is the world becoming less Western? […] What does it mean for the world if the West leaves the stage to others?"; they even coined a term, "Westlessness", which refers to "a widespread feeling of uneasiness and restlessness in the face of increasing uncertainty about the enduring purpose of the West" (MSC, 2020a). Be that as it may, even though the Indo-Pacific expression is of old coinage, as noted before, up to the early twenty-first century it was not part of the economic, political, or security lexicon. Discontent with the former term, Asia-Pacific, however, was one of the drivers for the terminological replacement (Cooper, 2019, p. 9).

Thus, in 2005 the "Indo-Pacific" concept appeared in the IR literature in an article on Australia-Southeast Asia relations, and again two years later in the security field, this time in a piece discussing India-Japan cooperation in sea lanes (Richardson, 2005; Khurana, 2007). Also in 2007 the idea of the Indo-Pacific entered the political realm in Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's "Confluence of the Two Seas" speech before the Indian Parliament. And three years later US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton noted "how important the Indo-Pacific basin is to global trade and commerce" (Clinton, 2010, pp. 7/8). To close the circle of this brief survey on the emergence of the Indo-Pacific concept where it began, Down Under, let's just mention that in 2013 Australia's Department of Defence White Paper noted the country's "ongoing economic strategic and military shift to the Indo-Pacific" (Government of Australia, 2013b, p. ix).

As in the case of Asia-Pacific, though, it was not clear what the margins of the supposed new region were. Thus, reviewing the references listed above for illustrative purposes, we have that the 2005 article thought of the Indo-Pacific

as consisting basically of ASEAN Plus Three countries (Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam; China, South Korea, and Japan), and Australia, New Zealand, and India. The 2007 security paper, in turn, defined it as "the maritime space comprising the Indian Ocean and the western Pacific. Littoral to it are the states of Asia (including West Asia/Middle East) and eastern Africa" (Khurana, 2007, p. 150 note 1); the Japanese Prime Minister's speech depicted it as "the entirety of the Pacific Ocean, incorporating the United States of America and Australia" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2007, para. 30), whereas in 2010 the US Secretary of State envisioned it as encompassing "Southeast Asia and the Pacific"; finally, the cited Australian White Paper defined the Indo-Pacific as "the arc extending from India through Southeast Asia to Northeast Asia, including the sea lines of communication on which the region depends" (and four years later the same ministry's White Paper redefined it as "the region ranging from the eastern Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean connected by Southeast Asia, including India, North Asia and the United States"; Government of Australia, 2017, p. 1). Thus, as in the case of Asia-Pacific, it would seem that the Indo-Pacific was also akin to Pascal's sphere.

As if to confirm the concept's fluid nature, in 2017 a White House document circumscribed the region to the area covered "from the west coast of India to the western shores of the United States" (White House, 2017, p. 46), a conception of the Indo-Pacific much smaller than the one enunciated a few months later by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who referred to the region as spanning from the Americas' west coast to the eastern shores of Africa.[6] Perhaps it would be more convenient to simply think of the Indo-Pacific, as an observer recently suggested, as a "mental map"—an imaginary cartography on which not even the countries that allegedly conform it can agree on (Prasad, 2019, p. 143; Choong, 2019, p. 417). It is thus not surprising that the Indo-Pacific lacks an emblematic organization.

Despite its nebulous state, though, both the definition of the region as well as the potential control of it are already a matter of dispute. Thus, APEC and ASEAN now seem to be vying for leadership of the new construct (ASEAN, 2019, p. 1; Cooper, 2019, pp. 9, 11). ASEAN, and particularly Indonesia as its

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6. In Choong 2019, p. 418 (in 2020 Matt Pottinger, US Deputy National Security Adviser announced an expansion of the Indo-Pacific to also include the eastern coast of the African continent [Basu, 2020]).

unofficial, middle-power leader, aims to play a role in the construction of the "Indo-Pacific discourse" (Anwar, 2020, p. 111). Similarly, it is not clear that the interests of another middle-power, Canada, align with the Indo-Pacific narrative (Reeves & Wallis, 2020, p. 5). Furthermore, it is crystal clear that the discourse on the Indo-Pacific emerged, to a large extent, as a response to the rise of two powers: China and India; but while the new construct has generally excluded the former, an APEC member "economy", it has embraced the latter—even if the term does not refer to the South Asian state, but to the Indian Ocean—which was not part of said forum. As Gurpreet Khurana, the author of the 2007 work mentioned above, and one of the main promoters of the emergent term has recognized, "It is true that the 'Indo-Pacific' concept has always been about China", and that "its coinage had much to do with the increased eminence of India with the turn of the 21st Century" (Khurana, 2017, pp. 2, 3).

In any case, it does not seem that the new term—Indo-Pacific—has quite displaced the older one—Asia-Pacific. Indeed, the country which has arguably most strongly embraced and promoted the more recent expression, Australia, has been quite equivocal about its meaning and use (Medcalf, 2018, p. 11). Its 2013 National Security Strategy notes: "Both terms can be used to define Australia's strategic setting" (Government of Australia, 2013a, p. 30). And as a recent tweet from Australia's Defence Minister put it, "The #IndoPacific is our home. We look at the shifts in both the 'Indo' and the 'Pacific'. Both regions are becoming increasingly contested" (MSC, 2020b).

But beyond definitional precision, the more relevant question might be whether a sort of "core" region has been created, or is in the process of being so (another relevant question, but one that escapes the focus of this article, is whether the new discourse on the Indo-Pacific, regardless of its vagueness, is indeed guiding [individual] states' actions; although it is commonly claimed that this is indeed the case [Pan, 2014, p. 454; Cannon and Rossiter, 2018, p. 9; Medcalf, 2018, p. 11], I am rather skeptical of such claim). That is, whether we can identify the advent of constructed focal points in the security, economic, or social realms. In the next three sections I look at these issue areas from the theoretical lenses of the approaches that are usually understood to have a "comparative advantage" in each of them: realism, liberalism, and constructivism, respectively.

2. The Realist Indo-Pacific

Realism in any of its multiple variants is about power and state survival. Regardless of whether it is an objective or a means, it is paramount if the state's security, that is, its survival, is to be achieved (Niebhur, 1960 [1932]; Carr, 1964/1939; Morgenthau, 1985/1946; Waltz, 1979; Gilpin, 1981; Walt, 1987; Mearsheimer, 2001). Since the international system is anarchical (in the sense of lacking a central authoritative body) each state must look after its own security. Now, a state has two (nonexclusive) options on this regard: internal and external balancing; the former does not involve other states, whereas the latter does (Levy, 1989; Morrow, 1993). Significantly, the first option does not contribute to region-building (more on this later).

Moreover, the systemic incentive all states have to engage in self-help behavior gives rise to what John Herz dubbed the "security dilemma", that is, the condition under which a state's actions aimed at increasing or maintaining its own security propel other states to feel less safe and therefore to take counter-measures– thus causing the former to consider itself even more insecure than before (Herz, 1950; Jervis, 1978; Glaser, 1997). From a realist perspective, the security dilemma is a feature of the international system, one that, to some extent, operates in tandem with the perennial balance of power in world politics.

The security dilemma becomes especially salient during times of power transition, that is, when a challenger or revisionist state emerges, thus threatening the established international order (Organski & Kugler, 1980; Gilpin, 1981). Given realism's materially focused conception of power (that is, its usual conception of it in monetary and/or military terms), any state whose economic base is increasing substantially is taken as a potential challenger. In the case at hand, as noted in the previous section, the advent of the discourse on the Indo-Pacific was undoubtedly related to the emergence of two powers: China and India. Now, the former's GDP went from representing around 3.6 of the world's in 2000 to around 16 percent in 2018, whereas the latter increased from a little bit more than one percent to around three percent in the same period (World Bank, 2020a). For obvious material but also ideological reasons, China has been considered the main challenger to (what used to be) the US-led, postwar international liberal order.

Accordingly, by 2007 in the emerging Indo-Pacific discourse both in Khurana's cited piece on India-Japan cooperation on sea lanes and in Prime

Minister Abe's also mentioned "Confluence of the Two Seas" speech, economic, as well as security issues were paramount. As Jeffrey D. Wilson has noted, "Maritime security is the *raison d'être* of the Indo-Pacific concept" (Wilson, 2017, p. 3)." Furthermore, in both Khurana's seminal paper as in Abe's address, there was an important actor: India, in a narrative where the (implicit) perceived threat was China. Similarly, also as noted, in 2011 Secretary Clinton remarked on the economic importance of the newfound region. As suggested above, however, some sort of security alliance, and not only internal balancing, would be necessary to actually create a sense of region-ness in the vast expanse covered by the Indian and Pacific oceans (even if it would not need to be as formalized as NATO, the post-World War II emblematic security association). Interestingly, French president Emmanuel Macron seems to have recognized as much when in 2018 he expressed his desire to create an "Indo-Pacific axis", formed by Paris, New Delhi and Canberra, as a sign of "geopolitical ambition" (in Scott, 2019, p. 92).

However, the balancing of China, which is what Indo-Pacific talk is really about, has taken place by and large through internal balancing. That is, the question is not whether or not power has been shifting from Washington to Beijing in the last decades, but whether the actions undertaken by the United States and other concerned states, to wit, Australia, India, and Japan are taking place within the "Indo-Pacific" framework—one that, according to Richard Javad Heydarian, is "ineluctable (structural) as well as policy-driven" (agential [Heydarian, 2020, p. 4; cf. Cannon & Rossiter, 2018, p. 10]). Indeed; from a realist perspective the expectation is that, as John Mearsheimer has put it (even if stopping short of using the current buzzword and instead sticking to the more conventional "Asia-Pacific"), "most of China's neighbors, to include India, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, Russia, Vietnam—and Australia—will join with the United States to contain China's power" (Mearsheimer, 2010, p. 382). But will they? And even more, will Washington pursue a collective security arrangement in the Indian and Pacific Oceans? Let's briefly consider the positions adopted by the four main promoters of this new construct.

For Washington, Indo-Pacific discourse is part and parcel of its Pivot to Asia strategy—a largely unilateral policy-change formally announced in 2011, during the Obama administration—. True, the new approach involves closer ties to other countries in the Pacific and the Indian oceans, but they remain secondary to its overall (mostly internal) rebalancing strategy. Thus, even though in 2018 the United States renamed its Pacific Command "Indo-Pacific",

its area of responsibilities remained unchanged. Washington's emphasis, specifically during the Obama years, was on the apparently more economy-focused Trans-Pacific Partnership. And I say apparently because, as Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter noted of the eventually doomed agreement, it was "as important for me as another aircraft carrier" (Cooper, 2015).

Regarding strict security arrangements, the United States is rather reluctant to engage in meaningful region-building alliances. Thus, Washington has been disinclined to give India—the presumed main strategic partner of the new arrangement—a leading role maintaining security in the region (He, K., 2018, pp. 152-153; Pant and Rej, 2018, p. 47). It is certainly the case that in 2016 the South Asian country was designated a "major defense partner" by the United States, and two years later it was placed within top category of the US Strategic Trade Authorization, allowing it to have access to sophisticated US manufactured military equipment. However, during the Trump administration these upgrades were seen more as a commercial opportunity for the deficit-obsessed president than as an important step in forming a security alliance (Strategic Investment Research Unit, 2020, p. 3). This transactional approach, as Mumbai-based Observer Research Foundation analyst Kashish Parpiani has noted, effectively does away with above-cited Defense Secretary Ash's doctrine (Johnson, 2020, p. 3). Tellingly, despite the repeated use (four times) of the fashionable term in the Joint Statement issued at the end of President Trump's February 2020 visit to India, most of the addressed issues related to the two countries cooperation regarding the Indo-Pacific had to do with political affairs (recognition of the Association of South East Asian Nations in the purported region, respect of international law, peaceful resolution of disputes), economic matters (trade), and foreign assistance (economic cooperation in third countries); high-level mechanisms on security issues were also part of the agenda (trilateral summit with Japan, consultations involving also Australia and Japan), but they were certainly not the driving force of the meeting (White House, 2020, p. 3). For the past US administration, the most important item on the agenda was the sale of $3 billion in military equipment to New Delhi.

The Joe Biden administration, though, has made a point of emphasizing the strong relationships the United States has with the other countries of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, to wit, Australia, India and Japan, a group usually known as "the Quad". Thus, soon after taking office, Biden organized a virtual summit with its counterparts on 12 March 2021. The four leaders re-

affirmed their shared values and even launched a joint Covid-19 vaccine effort; however, as former US Secretary of Defense James Mattis, along with Michel Auslin and Joseph Felter wrote, rather than a security alliance, "the group is more an aspiration that is grounded in common interests among the most important democracies in Asia" (Drezner, 2021, p. 2/3; Mattis et al., 2021, p. 1/4).

India, for its part, while embracing the concept—already in 2013 Prime Minister Manmohan Singh used the term in a speech in Japan—has been rather cautious in infusing its actions with an explicit Indo-Pacific rationale, perhaps in order to avoid further alienating China. As suggested, current Prime Minister Modi has also enthusiastically adopted the term, even if it has not been clear what the new discourse—centered mainly on economic matters and common values—means in terms of the country's involvement in multilateral security arrangements in the two oceans' large expanse (Choong, 2019, p. 418; Thakker, 2020, p. 2). As Aparna Pande has noted, "India is reluctant to cede power to a collective security mechanism" (Pande 2020, p. 4/4). New Delhi has recently certainly been more engaged on security matters in various fronts, including the Quad —towards which India had been rather cautious in order to assuage China (Todi, 2019, p. 2/6) —and its relationship with the United States. However, as noted, the Quad is an informal, *ad hoc* gathering that is unlikely to play a central role in the security arrangements of both the Pacific and Indian oceans; furthermore, New Delhi is not about to establish a close security relationship with Washington. As Zack Cooper and Charles Edel have recently noted, "the Indo-Pacific is a maritime theater, and each U. S. ally and partner worries about and prioritizes different contingencies" (Cooper & Edel, 2020, p. 5/7). Accordingly, India's regional strategy could be best described as "evasive balancing" (Beeson, 2018; Cooper, 2019, p. 13; Rajagopalan, 2020, p. 76).

Tokyo has been perhaps the most vocal of the main four players in the emergence of the Indo-Pacific regarding issues of trade and values. Since the above referred-to 2007 speech before the Indian Parliament, and then in a 2016 in Kenya, where he launched the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" idea, Prime Minister Abe's discourse on the purported region has been infused with liberal ideas. Japan has centered its Indo-Pacific discourse on its role as an advocate of a rule-based region, but it has not pushed for the creation of a durable security arrangement (He, K., 2018, p. 150).

Australia, in turn, has not only been the main promoter of the Indo-Pacific construct, but it has also been candid about its security component (Medcalf,

2018, p. 12; Beeson, 2018, p. 95). Already in 2012, in a visit to India, Australian Prime Minister Gillard used the new terminology, and the following year, as noted, the country's National Security Strategy fully embraced the Indo-Pacific construct (Scott, 2013, p. 437). Although also emphasizing the role of political matters in the construction of the potential region (PM Gillard, in her above-mentioned trip to India, spoke of the "open, democratic and pluralistic" nature of the two countries' societies [Scott, 2013, p. 437]); Canberra, as suggested, has been more outspoken and proactive regarding the security component of the potential security area. Thus, Australia has actively pushed for joint military exercises with the United States, something that is not new, given its post-World War II security arrangements with Washington, but it has done so with an increasingly explicit aim of containing China, and it has also encouraged the other Quad members to regularize joint military exercises —if not always with the results it hoped in terms of building a stable security arrangement (Scott, 2013; Perlez & Cave, 2017, p. 4/5; Cooper, 2019, p. 13). The recent Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) agreement, an Australian initiative by means of which London and Washington will help Canberra build nuclear-propelled submarines and increase intelligence sharing, is an important step in strengthening cooperation in the area, but it is far from constituting a sort of NATO in the purported Indo-Pacific (Bolton, 2021, p. 6/9; Mead, 2021, p. 3/4).

China, for its part, has been largely dismissive of the Indo-Pacific construct. Wang Yi, the country's foreign minister, regarded it in 2018 as an "attention-grabbing idea", one destined to "dissipate like ocean foam" (in Birtles, 2018, p. 1/2). Beijing has, however, taken note both of what it perceives as an encircling, hostile discourse toward it, as well as of the concrete actions taken by other countries in this context. But the concerted actions of the "Indo-Pacific" countries are not what worries China (Perlez & Cave, 2017, p 4/5; He, B., 2018). And Beijing is right: from a realist perspective, the mostly disjointed balancing efforts directed toward China, even if framed within a wider international discourse, do not a security alliance make. For that, a broader set of shared interests and/or values, a more meaningful constructed focal point would be necessary.

3. The Liberal Indo-Pacific

Liberalism starting point is the individual, not the state. State preferences are derived from society (or, more, precisely, from state-society interactions). But it is (mostly) states that interact and negotiate amongst themselves in the international system. IR liberal theory is thus, as Andrew Moravcsik has noted (using Peter Gourevitch's term), "second image reversed" (Gourevitch, 1978; Moravcsik, 1993, p. 13). That is, states take clues from the international system but, ultimately, they draw their purpose from their societies. Purpose is important in the liberal approach, as it can lead in different directions, to conflict or cooperation (Moravcsik, 1993, p. 16). But in either case, in a liberal approach–in contrast to the realist one–there is no ambiguity on whether power is a means or an end: it is the former (Moravcsik, 1993, p. 45). What matters is maximizing state utility, as defined by its preferences.

In the international economic arena, the liberal approach favors free trade, as it is regarded as the most efficient way to increase society's welfare (Gilpin, 1987). But collective action problems oftentimes make it difficult to attain it (Olson, 1971). Enter Neoliberal Institutionalism (NLI). This variant of liberalism intends to explain cooperation among egotists from a systemic perspective. It focuses on the structure of incentives in which self-interested actors interact. The central variable of NLI is interest (Hasenclever et al., 1997, p. 4). Thus, for instance, Robert Keohane first assumes that mutual interests among states exist, and then analyzes the conditions under which they will lead to international cooperation; institutions are crucial in this regard, as they act as enablers of it (Keohane, 1984; Wallander, 1999, pp. 5, 16). International cooperation is thus akin to public goods; the global trade regime, or any regional trade agreement for that matter, can thus be considered a kind of public good–an institutionalized one.

Now, the decision to join or remain in an institution–of a commercial nature in the case at hand–is taken by state actors on purely rational, cost-benefit, terms. That is, although common interests are assumed by NLI, for them to be consistent with the more fundamental concept of self-interest, they are by necessity no more than (utilitarian) focal points. However even if one could identify the areas where self-interest might actually lead to international cooperation, NLI will be able to tell us when a regime will be needed, not how or when it will emerge (Haggard & Simmons, 1987, p. 506). If one arises in the economic arena, though, it is expected to have positive consequences

not only for the welfare of the states that conform it–as suggested–but also, and here comes the interesting part for IR theory, for the prospects of peace in the international arena; there is a very well-established liberal literature in this regard (Keohane, 1990; Doyle, 1983, 1986).

The previous expectation explains the optimism of some liberal IR scholars, noted in the introduction, regarding the potential effects of the "Indo-Pacific" for international politics: an open trade area of this caliber could not only reduce transaction costs and increase welfare, but also bring about a more peaceful world. As Australian National University's Rory Medcalf has put it, the Indo-Pacific "is about finding ways peacefully to manage the intersection of multiple powers' interests in a vast commons" (Medcalf, 2018, p. 15).

But, of course, it is not only (some) academics that have seen in the alleged region a fertile ground for economic prosperity and more pacific international relations. Policy makers as well have latched onto the concept with the same purpose in mind. Thus, for instance, in 2010 Secretary of State Clinton, in explaining her country's "engagement in Asia-Pacific", noted that her country was aware of "how important the Indo-Pacific basin is to global trade and commerce" (Clinton, 2010, p. 7/8). Similarly, Australia's 2016 Defence White Paper notes that "The growing prosperity of the Indo-Pacific and the rules-based global order on which Australia relies for open access to our trading partners are based on the maintenance of peace and stability" (Government of Australia, 2016, p. 14).[7] But it has been Japan, and particularly its Prime Minister Abe, that has been the most vocal state actor regarding the economic role of the assumed region, through his already mentioned 2016 "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Initiative" (FOIP). According to the Japanese government, the overall objective of its initiative is to "Develop a free and open Indo-Pacific region as 'international public goods' [sic]" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2019, p. 2/16). The FOIP's first "pillar" is the "Promotion and establishment of the rule of law, freedom of navigation, free trade, etc. [sic]", an expected outcome of which is to "Maintain fundamental principles of the international order, which are the foundation of peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2019, p. 2/16).[8]

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7. Its 2020 revision, the Defence Strategic Update, notes "the growing shared interest across the Indo-Pacific in strengthening sovereignty and resilience to coercion"–in clear reference to Beijing's perceived aggressive foreign policy– (Government of Australia, 2020, p. 26).
8. FOIP has two other pillars: "Pursuit of economic prosperity", and "Commitment for peace and stability".

It would seem that the idea is to accomplish what APEC, in the context of Asia-Pacific discourse, was intended to achieve by 2020, according to its 1994 Bogor Goals (APEC, 2018). However, extending the objectives and practices of the forum to the Indian Ocean is not an easy task—not least because of the challenge of convincing several reluctant states to participate in institution-building, even if of a minimalist kind, perhaps ASEAN-style. Furthermore, countries other than Japan potentially supporting the FOIP would also have different understandings and strategies regarding the alleged economic area. The US withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which was part and parcel of its Pivot to Asia, and thus arguably compatible with the emergence of an economic Indo-Pacific, illustrates this point. Thus, notwithstanding the hypothetical advantage the existence of a trade liberalizing institution such as APEC could represent for the creation of the Indo-Pacific as a meaningful economic area, achieving in the relatively short term what APEC could not achieve in over two decades, and presumably among even more members (if only, because the area covered by Indo-Pacific waters is larger than the one covered by those of Asia Pacific) what APEC could not achieve in over two decades is a rather daunting enterprise.

Furthermore, the rationale for a substantial economic accord would seem to be weaker than in the security arena—the realm of the realist Indo-Pacific. Let's take the case of trade among the main promoters of the alleged region (Australia, India, Japan and the United States). For Australia the other main countries of the purported Indo-Pacific represented 25.03 percent of its total exports in 2018 (versus 31.37 percent in 2000); for India, the corresponding figure is 18.65 (and 27.22 for 2000); for Japan 22.85 (and 32.04 for 2000), and for the United States 8.05 percent in 2018 (versus 10.37 percent in 2000). Rather than an increase in relative trade, these figures suggest diminished relative business among the main promoters of the alleged Indo-Pacific (this change can of course be explained by the emergence of China, which, as noted, is usually out of the Indo-Pacific project [the percentage share of exports to Beijing went from 5.45 to 34.71 for Canberra, from 1.73 to 5.08 for New Delhi, from 6.43 to 19.52 for Tokyo, and from 2.07 to 7.21 for Washington]; World Bank, 2020b).

More broadly, as Wilson has noted, "the trade and investment ties linking Asia to the Indian Ocean rim are relatively thin"; for him, "rather than being a single and interdependent economic space, the Indo-Pacific contains two separate and distinct economic regions" (Wilson 2017, pp. 2, 7). Similarly, Kai

He has observed that "With a low level of economic integration among South Asian countries, the future of multilateralism or multilateral institutions in the Indian Ocean is unpromising" (He, 2018, p. 155). Thus, to the extent that there is an economic Indo-Pacific, it is a bifurcated one—not a very promising fact for the aim of making this huge expanse a single free trade area.

4. The Constructivist Indo-Pacific

In principle, constructivism could seem to be the more likely candidate to explain the (alleged) emergence of the Indo-Pacific—even if its geographic contours are rather fuzzy; after all, this approach holds that all regions are social constructs.[9] As Peter Katzenstein has put it, "geographic designations... are not 'real,' 'natural,' or 'essential.' They are socially constructed and politically contested (Katzenstein, 1997, p. 7)." Thus, the Indo-Pacific would be just one more case of a regional construct.

But it is not that easy; one cannot just conjure up a region. As a structuralist, "third image" (*per* Waltz 1959) approach, constructivism emphasizes norms and socially created identities that make societies—in this case it would be a regional society—cohesive. Such norms and identities must have real effects in order for them to find a place in constructivist discourse; one of those effects would be the creation of common interests. As Manfred Mols argued, "It is at this point that the story of a constructed region begins" (Mols, 2000, p. 12). But let's look at the region-building process from a constructivist perspective in more detail.

As suggested, constructivism proceeds in a holistic fashion; it aims to "understanding parts, such as states, in terms of wholes like international systems or reigning ideas" (Fearon & Wendt, 2002, p. 65). Material factors certainly matter, but the way they do it depends to a large extent on ideational issues. As Max Weber put it, "Not ideas, but material and ideal interests directly govern man's conduct. Yet very frequently the 'world images' which have been created by 'ideas' have, like switchmen, determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interests" (in Swedberg, 2005, p. 130).

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9. Constructivism comes in many flavors: moderate (or modern), critical, post-modern (Hopf, 1998); here I will concentrate on the first one, to which I will refer simply as "constructivism", for economy of language.

Norms are one of the key ideational issues constructivism focuses on; they are collective expectations of appropriate behavior (Jepperson et al., 1996, p. 54). There are two kinds of norms: constitutive and regulative. The former, as its label suggests, constitute social actors to the extent that they define them as legitimate participants in a given social activity; in this sense constitutive norms are akin to culture: they could be said to "make" the individual (Foucault, 1979, p. 194). Regulative norms, on the other hand, simply prescribe or proscribe behavior in given circumstances. Constitutive norms are the bread and butter of constructivism, since, as it can be surmised, they contribute to mold actors' identities.

Since identity always exists within a historic and cultural context, both its formation and maintenance process are determined—to certain extent—by the social norms of the moment (Berger & Luckman, 1966, p. 159). Once formed, however, identity tends to be relatively stable. It is by virtue of having an identity that actors make representations of others; thus, for instance, they distinguish between ally and enemy (Kowert & Legro, 1996). Furthermore, identity contributes to the agents' interest formation process. As Aaron Wildavsky put it, "no interests without selves to have them, and no selves without cultures to generate them. In short, no cultures, no interests" (Wildavsky, 1994, p. 150).

Being (partially) formed by the identity of the actor, interests should "fit" with it; otherwise there would be some sort of cognitive dissonance. Thus, interpreting the structural constrains they face in light of their own identity and interests, actors recursively engage in social interaction. At the international level, where states are the main actors, one such process is the creation of regional compacts —international orders writ small that create sense of "we-ness" among their members (Acharya, 2012; Adler & Barnett, 1998; Ayoob, 1999; Barnett, 1995; Hurrell, 1998). Now, as established in the previous discussion, even if regions are socially constructed, not anything goes when creating them. There are not, for instance, regions built on the basis of countries sharing the first letter of their names. Identity and interests are key drivers in the processes of regional building (and maintenance).

Thus, from a constructivist perspective, talk of an Indo-Pacific region would make sense only if we could observe some shared identities and/or interests among its putative participants—the way we do, for instance, in the Western Hemisphere (Whitaker, 1954; Sikkink, 1997; Santa-Cruz, 2005). That is, a constructivist analysis would look for the effects the hypothesized

norms might have on the emergence of a new region. However, without clear evidence about the existence of the normative corollaries named above (shared identities and/or interests), some scholars seem to have been carried away by the fashionable term, stating, *inter alia*, that "Constructivism of the Indo-Pacific' envisages that the ideas and images of the Indo-Pacific *have been* the construction of regionalism and geopolitics. The construction reveals the confluence of the two oceanic theatres of their profiles and competing interests", that "For constructivism, the concept of the Indo Pacific is a new 'ideational construct' *based on shared values and a common identity* in the region", that "the 'Indo-Pacific' region has been *accepted as mental map* by countries like India, Australia, United States and Japan", or that "The Indo-Pacific *now constitutes* what historian Yuval Harari termed as an "inter-subjective truth" (Prabhakar, 2014, p. 7; He, K., 2018, p. 150; Prasad, 2019, p. 143; Heydarian, 2020, p. 4; my italics)."

Decision makers' rhetoric has certainly contributed to the sense that the Indo-Pacific has emerged—or is impending. Thus, for instance, both Australian and Japanese officials have emphasized supposed common traits and values amongst the potential members of the alleged region, such as democracy and international rules (He, K., 2018, p. 155). Oftentimes the statements have a taste of wishful thinking; on others they are plainly false and anachronistic. Thus, for instance, former us Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in the above-mentioned Munich Security Conference that his country, along with "partners across the Indo-Pacific have sacrificed blood and treasure over the decades to protect and preserve it [the post-war "rules-based order"]" (Pompeo, 2020, p. 11). It seems that his predecessor Clinton was at least a little bit more sensitive to the nature of the alleged entity, as she recognized that "How we translate the growing connection between the Indian and Pacific oceans *into an operational concept is a question that we need to answer* if we are to adapt to new challenges in the region" (Clinton, 2011, p. 63; my italics).

As the previous sections have illustrated, though, there is not much sense of "we-ness" in either the sense of threat or of economic complementarity. With such weak foundations, the task of building a meaningful Indo-Pacific community—with shared norms, identities and values—seems herculean; Kai He, cited in the previous paragraph, seemingly endorsing the new construct, recognizes "the shaky ideational foundation of shared norms and principles in the region" (He, 2018, p. 156). It would thus seem that, from a constructivist perspective, there is no such thing as an Indo-Pacific region.

5. Concluding Remarks: IR Theory and the Indo-Pacific

As the previous sections suggest, the alleged Indo-Pacific is not a social fact. Perhaps that is why, after all, the concept has not become established in the specialized literature (e.g., Ravenhill, 2016; Pempel, 2019; Fawcett, 2020, p. 1372). What Robert Gilpin said of the current's concept first iteration, Asia-Pacific, seems to apply again: "Mutual political interests seem to be totally absent as a motivating force for greater regional cooperation" (Gilpin, 1995, p. 13). It is therefore not surprising that none of the three theoretical perspectives reviewed would "see" a region–in security, economic or ideational terms–in the Indo-Pacific. This is telling for, as suggested in the introduction, there would be in principle several possibilities for regions to incarnate, as each approach conceives of them differently.

But what Gerald Segal noted three decades ago when discussing the infatuation with things pertaining to the Pacific idea, seems to still be the case, thus preventing the emergence of an identifiable region of any kind in the vast expanse the new term is supposed to cover: "There is no important cultural, ideological, political, economic, or even military sense in which it is particularly useful to talk of 'the Pacific' " (Segal, 1990, 377). That is, even though the approaches considered would put forward different kinds of regional compacts–and in that sense it is not simply a matter of them "seeing" a single or unique region "at the confluence of the two oceans"–they should also be able to tell when, with their own blinders, they do not see one–and that seems to be the case with the Indo-Pacific.

However, as I suggested in the introduction, the different regions the analytical approaches envision would have something in common: all of them would be constructed focal points, that is, they would have some institutional density. The key word here is "constructed" (Garret & Weingast, 1993, p. 176). That is, the conventional understanding of the modified term, "focal point", emphasizes its role simply as enabler of coordination–of whatever kind (security, economic, social). In his seminal piece Thomas Schelling put it this way: "People *can* often concert their intentions or expectations with others if each knows that the other is trying to do the same" (Schelling, 1989/1960, p. 57). But note that there is history implicit in this common knowledge: the actors rely on previously developed shared understandings to achieve coordination. Focal points do not emerge out of thin air.

Furthermore, this common knowledge is usually taken to refer only to the regulative, not to the constitutive aspects of social interaction (Wendt, 1999, pp. 167-168; Hemmer & Katzenstein, 2002, p. 600). But for the former to work, the latter needs to be there as well, as a sort of background knowledge (built on t-1). This background knowledge refers to the institutional framework in which actions take place. I am using here a broad understanding of institutions, one that refers to "basic" or fundamental ones; sovereignty and international law would be two instances of them (Bull, 1977). This is in accordance with a frequent, commonsensical understanding of common knowledge. Thus, for instance, Stephen Krasner has noted that "The Westphalian system has become common knowledge"—thus pointing to the institutional nature of the term in the international arena (Krasner, 1996, p. 147).

This makes sense, for as Schelling himself noted regarding the conditions required to find a focal point, "we are dealing with imagination as much as with logic" (Schelling, 1989/1960, p. 58). And imagination transcends the logic of mere instrumental rationality—such as the one applied to solve security or economic coordination problems, when narrowly defined. Imagination, and passion, are also the stuff of politics (Hirschman, 1977; Hippler, 2011; Katzenstein & Seybert, 2018). And it is in the political arena where background institutional agreements—the common knowledge required by focal points to emerge—get created. It is in that kind of basic or prior institutionalization where the realist, the liberal and the constructivist approaches converge; that is, I would argue that the three of them would rely on some sort of basic, socially constructed—and not merely material, narrowly rational or spontaneous (i.e., ahistorical)—focal point for their respective regional constructs to make sense. If that basic political understanding begins to emerge in the putative Indo-Pacific, the table would be set for the creation of a meaningful region—from any of the three world views examined here. In the meantime, as noted in the introduction, it would seem that the Indo-Pacific remains only a fuzzy prospect.

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