Unmapping the Indo-Pacific: A Strategic Communications Perspective

A Review Essay by Chiyuki Aoi

*Indo-Pacific Empire: China, America and the Contest for the World’s Pivotal Region*  

*Unmapping the 21st Century: Between Networks and the State*  

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The Indo-Pacific captures the imagination of the strategic communicator. Although the concept of the Indo-Pacific remains vague and difficult for many policymakers and practitioners to grasp, particularly those from outside the area, it may be because the idea of the Indo-Pacific is at heart founded on ambiguity. The Indo-Pacific is a work in progress, as multiple actors and stakeholders try to define their own diplomatic, geopolitical/economic, and security parameters. And that process is inherently ambiguous. That process, too, is strategic communications.
The two books reviewed here explain why the Indo-Pacific should merit the attention of the strategic communicator and of policymakers and practitioners. Medcalf’s *Indo-Pacific Empire* is not specifically presented as dealing with strategic communications, and Michelsen and Bolt’s *Unmapping the 21st Century* is not confined to the Indo-Pacific. Both, however, focus on the notion of ‘maps’ or cartography, which I argue to be the key to understanding the Indo-Pacific as an emerging geopolitical space. Michelsen and Bolt, further, focus on two types of ‘maps’—a hierarchical one (‘the state map’) and a horizontal one (‘the network map’)—and reveal the tension and symbiosis between the two. It is, then, critical to understand the Indo-Pacific by recognising its essential characteristics as a map, as well as a network in the making, with the network’s principal attributes manifest, centring on ambiguity.

Here, by ‘unmapping’ the Indo-Pacific in the cartographic sense, we can see how the region is instead a networked ‘space’—a map in the making. The makers of the map are multiple. Its primary stakeholders are the middle powers of the Indo-Pacific or outside, not the usual suspects, China and the United States, the two superpowers. The central political and strategic dynamics in the Indo-Pacific are set in motion by these middle-power strategic agencies and the ‘nodes’ created among them, such as the new and old Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), and AUKUS groupings, even if the driving force behind those dynamics is the rise of China and the intensifying US–China rivalry played out in the region.

The Indo-Pacific network map critically relies on collective memory-making, looking back into the past, while projecting, at the same time, an imagined path towards the future through storytelling. This, in essence, is strategic communications. The stories are plural, as the agencies and stakeholders multiply. Unmapping the logic of the Indo-Pacific this way is essential to clarifying what policy priority will emerge when policymakers—particularly those from the West—face this region.
Medcalf’s book, *Indo-Pacific Empire*, is rich with country- or region-specific diplomatic history and with insights informed by the author’s experience as a diplomat. What makes it unique, however, is that Medcalf innovatively captures the essence of the Indo-Pacific not so much as a physical or geographical area, but rather as an imagined ‘map’. He shows that there are temporal, physical, and imagined spaces across this vast area stretching between the east coast of Africa and the Pacific Ocean.

The temporal space is the historical nature of the Indo-Pacific with different views on its history as perceived by the various actors in the region. The idea of the Indo-Pacific resonates with Australians, for instance, as the name evokes its historical experience as an emerging, ‘ambitious and pragmatic new society’ about to take root in a new region, ‘a home that is neither entirely Asia nor the West’ (p. 32), while the Chinese historically held ambitions towards it as their maritime backyard. What former Japanese premier Shinzo Abe described in his speech to the Indian Parliament in 2007 as the ‘confluence of the two seas’ was a metaphor for the shared history of Indians and Japanese. He looked back into the past, noting the achievements of the great philosophical and religious leaders of India whom the Japanese respected and admired, before tracing the more recent history of the two nations as democracies. He then projected into the future a vision of India and Japan as free, democratic, and becoming more prosperous together.

The physical space is the differing views on the geography of the Indo-Pacific, as understood and promoted by key actors in the region. Medcalf presents old maps of the region, as viewed historically by the Chinese, Italian, and British. These maps, distorted due to technical difficulties, depict a vast maritime area where trade and movement of people historically were irresistible across both sides of the Indo-Pacific. These maps show actual geographic shapes. Yet they also reflect how people projected onto them their interests, values, and world views. These maps indicate, rather, lines of transactions connecting various parts of
the world, through activities, be they maritime trade or movement of people and goods on the Eurasian landmass.

The imagined space is the ever-changing vision of the ‘map’ of the Indo-Pacific by those involved in the region. Imagined space, too, evolved and changed through history. The agencies in this cartography are middle powers, visualising in their minds how their growing associations might alter the diminishing space of their own as China expands out of its previously physically occupied space into a newly imagined one.

As Medcalf shows, the key to understanding the Indo-Pacific is that the region is both old and new, as the temporal, physical, and imagined are always in flux. The reader is reminded that all borders as such are imagined.

Michelsen and Bolt’s *Unmapping the 21st Century* also tackles cartography and goes further conceptually to examine the ‘state map’ and ‘network map’, revealing the characteristics of each, as well as the dynamics between the two. The authors provide an ambitious theoretical explanation of the tensions, synergies, and interactions between the two maps, never presenting them as opposites but as in a symbiosis, citing plentiful empirical examples drawn from insurgencies and revolutions of the past and present. The differences in examples (the book is not about the Indo-Pacific) do not matter here. What is highly relevant here is the key notion of the network, which is the focus of the Michelsen–Bolt book. The actual functioning of networks, and their relation to the rules and norms of those that govern the international domain (hierarchy), is highly illuminating in the context of the Indo-Pacific as well. Here (paraphrasing Galloway’s *Protocol*) even the Internet is depicted as a ‘governed’ space, albeit compromised by its horizontal and fluid structure.

Michelsen and Bolt also capture the temporal, physical, and imagined dimensions of networks. The temporal dimension is covered by the inclusion of a history of networks—be they of the Mongols, Maoists, or

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Islamic movements and global protests of numerous types today. Both authors understand deeply, as experts, irregular fighting, knowledge that they translate into post-structuralist/Deleuzian language.

The physical dimension of networks is analysed in layers, ranging from characteristics of structure (horizontal and hierarchy) to tactics (swarming). Here, the authors are at pains to explain how horizontal networks are not the conceptual opposite of hierarchy; nor are they mutually exclusive. Rather, the horizontal structure always coexisted with hierarchy, with both trying to outmanoeuvre the other. At times, they complement each other; as no networks are without some form of governance, informality does not preclude ordering structure. Nor can hierarchy do without horizontal networks, particularly as contemporary society is deeply influenced by and embedded in rapidly digitalising communications technology. The political economy, indeed, provides the undertone to this sophisticated reading of the nature of twenty-first-century capitalist societies and how cartography provides the key for understanding them.

The imagined dimension of networks is captured as the ‘attraction’ of networks—the ‘romance’ of networks, or the imagined power of networks. It may only be imagination. Yet, from Cuba to Brazil to Russia, revolutionaries pursued romance with the (imagined) promise of networks as their guiding maps to reach success (in their revolutions). Indeed, nothing succeeds like a success story (of romance). The greatest success story of networks might have been the Maoist insurgency in the mid twentieth century, which provided a (pre-existing) template for later generations of revolutionaries to follow. Here, maps not only define physical areas for them to capture, but also indicate paths to reach an imagined place. Here, too, one is reminded of how horizontal logic meshed with vertical governance. The Maoist movement, which started out as networked bands of guerrillas, then very quickly developed into one of the world’s most centralised hierarchies (the state governed by the Chinese Communist Party), perhaps unsurprisingly, as networks
require some sort of governing hierarchy in order for them to capture power, as this book reminds us.

The value of this book lies in a much-enhanced understanding of the promise, and the limitations, of networks. What is also gained is the insight into the evolution in the communicative environment in which our societies operate. Linear ‘sending’ and ‘receiving’ of ‘data’ and ‘information’, resulting in stratified knowledge, are no longer to be expected in our networked twenty-first-century society. Instead, we have a much more complex situation where ‘the more technologies […] came on stream, the more difficult it became to control thought and dissent’ (p. 93). In an age of digital technologies that rapidly transmit ideas and images, it is the technologies that ‘determine the means by which information becomes knowledge’ (p. 96). Ideas and images are further structured by individuals’ maps (or world views), and these are now formed ‘not through a harmonizing diffusion but paradoxically, through disjuncture, through flows of images that simultaneously support and challenge state hegemony’ (ibid.). This evolution, then, is to be expected in the Indo-Pacific in the coming months and years as well.

**Cartography as Strategic Communications**

While neither *Indo-Pacific Empire* nor *Unmapping the 21st Century* specifically discusses ‘strategic communications’ per se, read together they reveal the essence of strategic communications and its relevance to mapping, and further, to the Indo-Pacific.² The books elaborate on the interlinkages between mapping (and unmapping) storytelling to create both memories of the past and images of the future, while giving meaning based upon the actors’ values and identities to the emerging or imagined map. This process is the essence of strategic communications.

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² For an earlier, albeit preliminary, work on the centrality of strategic communications to the Indo-Pacific, see Chiyuki Aoi, *The Significance of Strategic Communications: Implications for the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Initiative*, Robert Schuman Centre, Global Governance Programme, Policy Brief (European University Institute, July 2021).
Michelsen and Bolt’s book, especially, presents a convincing argument for strategic communications as cartography/mapping. They discuss how actors’ strategies are framed by a ‘state map’ or a ‘network map’, each corresponding to a hierarchical world view and a horizontal world view (bearing in mind that both reinforce each other through the tensions between them). Each actor tries to create discourses and behave in ways to realise their vision of these maps. And the spaces concerned are coloured by the actor’s corresponding identities and by how their boundaries are defined or imagined. These boundaries are not necessarily physical, but could be solely perceptive or normative. Strategic communications entails the long-term shaping of dominant discourses in societies from which certain behaviours emanate to affect and shape the future world order according to their visions. Hence strategic communications is constructive and becomes a form of cartography. Strategic communicators in world politics are, by necessity, cartographers of the world map.

Strategic communications is inevitably linked to ambiguity. As Michelsen and Bolt have shown, ambiguity is inherent in all ‘relationships’—be they within or between multiple individuals or communities trying to communicate. As the number of entities communicating increases, complexities increase, with corresponding augmentation in ambiguity and uncertainty. In international relations, ambiguity arises as either intended or unintended consequences of agencies’ strategic choices, made in bilateral or in more complex interactions. And ambiguity may arise out of certain contexts, particularly those enabled by twenty-first-century technologies. Any threat or promises expressed need to be interpreted in the light of given circumstances, which involve odds for or against their implementation. Intensions may be deliberately shrouded in ambiguity as agencies try to hide their motives or keep information private in order to preserve the advantage. Further, actors increasingly engage in untruth telling, which augments doubts and confusion, and subverts decision-making.

Ambiguity in relation to networks can be critical. Networks or horizontal structures are by nature flexible, creating opportunities for connectivity,
participation, and inclusion. (The Indo-Pacific is emphatically about creating ‘connectivity’ and ‘inclusion’.) Yet networks also create ambiguity and uncertainty, because those very attributes that belong to networks such as connectivity, participation, and collectivity normally have built into them opposite processes\textsuperscript{3} which are a source of speculation and ambiguous situations. Networks imply disconnection (on the Internet providers can cut off certain users) as much as connectivity. The flexibility of networks is not necessarily a guarantee of participation, or inclusion, as there are stratifications in networks (‘codes’ of conduct, for example, or the requirement to be invited or tacitly accepted before entry, in addition to a willingness to accept/agree to these invitations). Networks, further, allow for flexibility at the level of engagement, whether one takes part in decision-making or collective action, or is simply aligned at an informal level. Hence networks are not synonymous with ‘collectivity’, either. All these dimensions create uncertainty and ambiguity.

None of the above implies, however, that ambiguity is intrinsically bad; nor that its opposite (certainty of rules and rule following; clarity of duties and responsibilities) is automatically a good thing, as the latter may be too demanding and binding on state sovereignty in international relations. In other words, ambiguity makes one avoid the commitment trap of a collectivity or formal association. Ambiguity is a logic of networks. It extends the lives of horizontally aligned networks and allows them to gain/expand loosely knit associations, in the process creating possibilities and space (temporal, physical, or imaginary) in which some forms of action and further association will occur, albeit with limitations to achieving ‘hard goals’ such as those belonging to formal alliances (collective defence).

The Indo-Pacific Map

All these attributes of cartography and networks mirror the characteristics of the Indo-Pacific. As vividly portrayed in Medcalf’s book, the

Indo-Pacific is mapping in progress and therefore strategic communications is at work. The Indo-Pacific map, also, is best understood as a network, not a hierarchy whose key attribute is not so much flexibility as ambiguity.

Japan has been an unlikely—some would say—promoter of the Indo-Pacific network; it has long been categorised as possessing a strong state (hierarchy), with a reputation for passive foreign-security policy. Under the banner of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)—as vague as it may sound—Japan has been trying to construct a space in the vast maritime areas connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans but also covering adjacent land regions stretching from the east coast of Africa to the western Pacific. ‘Like-minded countries’, though not limited to liberal democracies in the strict sense of the term, were to cohabit in the space to support a rules-based international order.

When then prime minister Abe gave a speech in the Indian Parliament in 2007, he first unveiled his ambition to create a ‘confluence of the two seas’—the Indian and Pacific Oceans—with India and Japan as the key players in what he envisaged as the emerging region of the Indo-Pacific, although the term itself is older in its usage. After a hiatus of several years, upon his return to power in 2012, he swiftly moved to upgrade Japan’s security architecture, including a focus on global diplomacy and a foreign policy focus on the Indo-Pacific. In 2016 he announced at the occasion of TICAD in Kenya his strategy for FOIP, which promised that Japan would pursue the rule of law and connectivity through development assistance and security cooperation to promote a rules-based international order in the region.

The narrative that Abe provided to promote FOIP was an ‘identity narrative’.4 Japan told stories of itself as a nation that overcame past militarism and rebuilt from the ashes of war to establish itself as a mature democracy, just as India too had been an established democracy. Stories of the past were, in the case of Japan, linked to its future-oriented mantra of a ‘proactive contribution to peace’—an identity narrative that was

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4 Aoi, Significance of Strategic Communications.
enshrined in its first National Security Strategy adopted in 2013 by the Abe administration. Japan was to pursue the goal of creating FOIP by engaging proactively with partners in the region and beyond, based upon a peace-oriented posture in global diplomacy and multilayered policies. These would uphold the rule of law in the maritime domain, most notably the South China Sea, establishing connectivity and quality infrastructure assistance on land, especially in Southeast Asia. One should note that Japan’s Overseas Development Aid (ODA), which began in the 1950s as war reparations and grew into one of the largest aid programmes in the world—Japan was the world’s leading aid donor between 1991 and 2000—concentrated on large states in Asia (China and India) as well as Southeast Asia. In hindsight one might conceive Japan’s ODA, with a focus on key economic and social infrastructure-building such as transport, electricity, and communications, as an effort to engage with what would later become the Global South.

Another dimension in Abe’s legacy was the short-lived attempt to establish the Democratic Security Diamond in 2012. Having connected with India in 2007, Abe soon promoted the idea of creating a loose association among four maritime democracies—Japan, India, Australia, and the United States—within the larger scheme of connecting, just as with FOIP, the Indian Ocean to the western Pacific. This was instrumental in the revival of the then dormant Quad of 2007. Japan then started to expand the horizons of its diplomacy and security cooperation to include ‘like-minded countries’ in Europe, trying to draw them into engagement in Indo-Pacific affairs.

For Japan FOIP was not a mere naming of a geographical area. Nor was it a formal institution-making exercise to simply add to existing international institutions in the older Asia-Pacific construct. It was an ‘Indo-Pacific strategy’, based upon a network map, a key attribute of which is ambiguity. Japan moved away from the initial term ‘FOIP strategy’ to what is now termed ‘FOIP vision’, rendering the concept more ambiguous. This language is intended to make cautious states (now comprising middle-ground states in the Global South, especially
in Southeast Asia) more comfortable with the idea. Ambiguity helped bring others to at least tacitly accept what was now the pillar of Japanese foreign policy, opening the way for further collaboration on specific projects involving development assistance and security cooperation.

As Medcalf vividly portrays, however, the Indo-Pacific space historically had been a shared space, with different meanings attached to it depending upon the dominant actors, age/time, and values of the day. By choosing the nomenclature of FOIP, it projected into a twenty-first-century context a concern for liberal values that seemed to be coming under increasing threat. The focus would be freedom of navigation and openness of the seas, even if their contours were vague. Imbuing a space with meaning is strategic communications in action.

In security discourse, especially surrounding the South China Sea where freedom of navigation and openness of trade and transactions were increasingly under threat, support for the concept grew. The rest is a familiar story. Once the United States (then under President Donald Trump) expressed support, Europe followed suit with constituent states and European Union institutions adopting their respective Indo-Pacific strategies. ASEAN published its own *Outlook on the Indo-Pacific*.

What makes the story of the Indo-Pacific in the twenty-first century interesting is that each of these Indo-Pacific strategies had different yet overlapping meanings, establishing a range of different emphases and priorities as dictated by the agency’s foreign policy. The term ‘Indo-Pacific’ has now emerged as a common reference point that denotes for the next generation the geopolitical centre of gravity affecting global security. The term is ambiguous enough to allow for sufficient flexibility, so that different agencies can use it in the way that suits their foreign policy. Yet, it also provides for a contour (or some might say a minimum common denominator) of interests and values that apply to this region, such as rule of law, connectivity, and freedom of navigation, as well as stability of the rules-based international order.
What is critical to understand, moreover, is that none of the Indo-Pacific actors seems intent on creating the rules, norms, and procedures that usually accompany formal international organisations. There is no attempt to create a process leading to the duplication of regional organisations (as some fear, such as NATO), or even institutions of the likes of ASEAN or associated regional forums—twentieth-century inventions in the Asia-Pacific. The foundational institution underlying the spontaneous idea of the Indo-Pacific is, in fact, the network. This is significant in the contemporary environment where technology, communications, information, and data analytics create a tapestry on which to design a regional order that is essentially different from any of the last century.

The Indo-Pacific Network

The Indo-Pacific, therefore, is a network with all the essential characteristics. The politics in the Indo-Pacific clearly do not follow what Michelsen and Bolt categorically call ‘the state map’. If a state map is about a vertical, hierarchically stratified chain of command, the Indo-Pacific has no equivalent of such centralised authority. And yet, as Michelsen and Bolt explain, ‘networks and hierarchies are false opposites’ (p. 59). Stratifying authorities of a state map do not necessarily preclude horizontal systems that distribute information, people, and knowledge. Moreover, networks are normally embedded in a control system, if one follows Galloway’s reasoning. And the Indo-Pacific’s interstate networks may not be an exception. Indeed, basic control procedures may be loosely set by some state authorities that share common interests, for example, by (tacit) agreement among the engaged middle powers and the US (often their common ally). These states may tacitly yet collectively decide who will be invited into ‘the club’ or to the nodes, as explained below. The latter practice is akin to vertical control over horizontal distribution systems through a collective/social control, albeit sporadic and loosely organised.
Indeed, such a mix of horizontal and vertical maps in the Indo-Pacific has meant that ambiguity has served as a vehicle for regional political dynamism. Observers, practitioners, and academics have found it difficult to understand the governing logic of such a networked system. FOIP has been branded America’s tool for ‘containing’, ‘balancing’, or even ‘detering’ China. Alternatively, there has been a tendency to interpret middle-power associations in the Indo-Pacific as ‘hedging’ against the (relative) decline of US power or commitment. However, associations in the Indo-Pacific do not represent ‘hedging’, as the region has practically no vested hard capabilities sufficient to replace US power (nor is allegiance to China a real option for most democracies). None of the established strategic concepts rings true in the region, which fundamentally relies on the logic of connectivity (with embedded dysconnectivity).

Such misapprehensions are political discourses, and may reflect what Michelsen and Bolt describe as the danger of confusing ‘maps for the territory’. Another area of confusion might be that FOIP for some is (correctly perceived as) an inclusive network, where any state that subscribes to its basic principles of maintaining free and open seas would be welcomed as a partner. Yet for others FOIP is just a name denoting a geographic continuity, or meetings or talking shop, devoid of actual content or meaning. The latter is far removed from the reality.

Another key network characteristic of the Indo-Pacific is its inclusion of an ever-growing number of hubs, or what we might call nodes (again following Michelsen/Bolt and Galloway), within the Indo-Pacific network. As noted, the makers of the Indo-Pacific map are middle powers and key stakeholders in the stability of the region, who often respond to the growing influences of China and the ensuing G2 rivalry.

Starting from ‘like-minded countries’, the oldest and perhaps foremost of these nodes within the Indo-Pacific construct is the Quad, which refers to the group of Japan, Australia, India, and the United States. It has a practical origin in the collective humanitarian assistance and disaster response (HADR) mission launched following the Indian
Ocean tsunami that occurred after the 2004 earthquake off the coast of Sumatra. At that time, these four countries formed a Core Group to lead international support for the affected regions.

This was followed by a series of more practical diplomatic-level meetings in May 2007, when senior officials met for the first time (Quadrilateral Dialogue of 2007). However, strong Chinese opposition, the sudden departure of Abe due to illness, and changes in the administrations in Australia and the US resulted in a hiatus that lasted until 2017. The Quad was viewed in Australia especially, then under Mandarin-speaking Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, as more provocative than stabilising. Since 2017, regular meetings have been held at the level of senior officials and biannually at the foreign minister level. The latter met for the first time in 2019 in New York on the occasion of the UN General Assembly. In March 2021 the Quad Leaders Summit brought together its countries’ heads of state. Through these meetings, the Quad has discussed practical cooperation in areas such as quality infrastructure, maritime security, counterterrorism, cyber security, and HADR, all for the purpose of realising FOIP.

The Quad’s importance lies in the fact that it is a grouping that keeps India tied to multilateral groupings made up otherwise of Western democracies, as it does in the more general FOIP framework. India’s traditional non-aligned policy, which during the Cold War meant a pro-USSR stance and in the post-Cold War world often a pro-Russia stance, remains officially unchanging, even as India pursues more pragmatic approaches (under Modi’s Act East policy) to engage with Japan and East Asia. One of the core achievements, then, of the Indo-Pacific construct is securing India’s place in Indo-Pacific multilateral groupings involving Western democracies.

The Quad has more recently initiated a series of more practically oriented working groups, often referred to as Quad Plus, clustered around various subjects such as COVID-19 vaccine production and distribution, critical

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and emerging technologies, and climate change. This indicates a further expansion of the Quad hub into issues of mutual concern, creating more points of connectivity.

AUKUS is unique among nodes in the Indo-Pacific in comprising only English-speaking countries—two from the British Commonwealth (Australia and the United Kingdom) and the United States. These countries of course have a history of intelligence sharing (Five Eyes) and other military-security cooperation. The abrupt announcement of the launch of this grouping at the cancellation of a submarine acquisition agreement between Australia and France was received with much surprise globally. The cancellation of Australia’s acquisition of conventional French-made submarines was followed by the announcement of three-party collaboration to equip Australia with nuclear-powered submarines, first by purchasing ex-US Navy Virginia-class submarines from the US, while Australia, jointly with the UK, would develop a new design of submarine, the SSN-AUKUS class. Equipment would be acquired from both countries—a reactor from the UK and a combat system from the US. Australian capabilities are contributing to security and stability of the Indo-Pacific, where the country is building new bases that would supplant the forward deployment of US forces in Guam, which are increasingly vulnerable to potential Chinese attack. The AUKUS narrative on this matter is also pronounced among these nodes. Theirs is a technical story and its aims are framed largely in terms of a security/military balance.

Turning to the so-called middle-ground group, ASEAN, established in 1967, is the oldest of the Indo-Pacific nodes. Given the historic centrality of ASEAN in Asian international relations, and given its location near the South China Sea, it retains significant influence on the Indo-Pacific construct. It is important also in the sense that the association comprises middle-ground countries belonging to the Global South, with the exception of the Philippines, due to its alliance and close association with the United States. The central principle therefore is the sacrosanct nature of sovereign equality as well as ASEAN centrality. ASEAN asserts its right to make decisions without external interference. According to
its own account, it has long resisted the language of values, especially any emphasis on governance systems such as democracy and human rights. It is indicative that different approaches to such governance-related values comprise a fundamental disjunction or disconnect in the Indo-Pacific network. This then becomes a major source of ambiguity in the discursive practice of the Indo-Pacific.

ASEAN adopted a common stance towards the expanding Indo-Pacific network. The Outlook document enunciates the main assertion that ASEAN centrality is the fundamental principle in its dealings with the Indo-Pacific. Consequently, it refuses to be put in the position of having to choose between China and the United States. Diplomatically, however, ASEAN has accepted working with the Indo-Pacific countries, and where possible it would cooperate with them on specific projects, such as maritime cooperation and connectivity, including infrastructure and people-to-people connectivity.

If these are nodes in the broader Indo-Pacific network, recently there has also been increasing engagement from Europe, both via the European Union institution and individual European states. In general, European narratives centre on the notion of multilateralism. Europe essentially shares concerns with ASEAN that the region is becoming a battleground between China and the US. And amid that tension, Europe argues that Europe will work to prevent the region from being dominated by G2 rivalry. Much like ASEAN, Europe calls for ‘strategic autonomy’; multilateralism can create the space in which such autonomy is enabled.

Spontaneity and Ambiguity

The Indo-Pacific is a cartography in progress. It is a new geopolitical space where each participant’s and stakeholder’s memory and vision for the future is told and co-exists. As a result, spontaneous groupings have emerged, leading to a largely uncoordinated growth of horizontally

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connected nodes. Signs of a hierarchical ‘code’ of conduct (control) do exist, primarily in the form of coordinated decisions among key stakeholders, mainly proactive middle powers but notably including the United States, which belongs to most of the existing nodes (except for ASEAN). Japan in the meantime is the key initiator of the FOIP idea and one of the most proactive diplomatic drivers of the evolution of the network, together with Australia.

Medcalf argues that ‘Japan is seeking to limit Chinese power—or North Korean belligerence—by building a web of partnerships with many others’ (p. 154, emphasis added). He goes on to observe that FOIP’s predominant rationale is a strategy to ‘hedge and buttress by making the most of multipolarity’ (p. 155). Japan has a pragmatic policy towards China economically, under the banner of ‘cooperate and compete’, with its businesses engaged in joint infrastructure projects with China under ‘Belt and Road’ initiatives in third countries. At the same time, Japan has a keen interest in checking the occasional volatility of US foreign policy—Trump-era disruption of the free-trade agreement (p. 154). To uphold a rules-based international order, thus, means shaping the attitudes and behaviour not only of China but of the United States too.

It is clearly indicated in these passages that Japan is engaged in an exercise of creating ambiguity, signalling to both China and the United States that alignment of middle-ranked powers would open up necessary space to protect and maintain or create order and rules, while allowing space for spontaneous invention and further policy coordination. This flexibility is a form of influence. Hence ambiguity is a strategic asset.

So too is the idea of influence, as opposed to a mechanical, linear conception of power associated with ‘limit’, ‘balance’, and a formula designed to ‘contain’. Influence suggests ambiguity of purpose and process, as well as the shaping of the strategic discursive environment. Influence like strategy is, further, affiliated to the notion of manoeuvre implying spontaneity and adaptability as the need arises.
Interestingly for Japan, whose ‘military’ policy has been limited under the current pacifist constitution, the FOIP concept provides a strategic umbrella under which some of the newer activities of the Japanese Self-Defence Force can be bureaucratically justified as well, such as its increasing focus on defence cooperation and joint exercises. This can be so precisely because FOIP’s ambiguity—not a formal military alliance like the Japan–US alliance, but more than a forum for multilateral dialogue—creates a space where the JSDF can perform its ongoing operations in a flexible manner.

A similar tendency is reported with regard to another middle-ranked power and key ally of the United States in the Indo-Pacific, Australia. It maintains a similar multipolar policy and as a middle power is invested heavily in the rules-based international order (Medcalf, p. 157). Just as with Japan, Australia has in its 2020 Defence Strategic Update the ‘shaping’ of the international environment as a strategic objective. 7 It takes a layered approach, creating new ‘small groups’ for alignment (‘minilaterals’) and holding onto bilateral relations with its key partner, the US (p. 157).

Together, these middle-power states’ spontaneous policies create an effect that is similar to swarming tactics, as explained by Michelsen and Bolt. Flexible and adoptive, swarming tactics allow longevity for smaller/middle-ranking powers in the face of a stronger hostile agency, where effective communication is essential (p. 76). Swarming, in other words, creates new maps.

Conclusion

These two groundbreaking books on cartography in international relations reveal essential aspects of strategic communications relevant to the Indo-Pacific. As Bolt argues, strategic communications ‘entail

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long-term shaping and shifting of significant discourses in societies’, from which certain behaviours emanate to shape the visions of the future world order. Strategic communications is also about constructing a shared identity, giving meanings to the shared experience of the past, present, and future through storytelling. As NATO Terminology stresses, strategic communications entails both interests and values, when defined as a ‘holistic approach to communication based on values and interests that encompasses everything an actor does to achieve objectives in a contested environment’. These two books make clear that mapping is tantamount to this exact process—a map being a momentary snapshot in the projection of power and aspirations that merges the past, present, and future into a cartographic imaginary. In this cartographic process, as both books so richly demonstrate through empirical evidence, storytelling is used to create both memories of the past and images of the future, while providing meaning to the emerging map based upon the actors’ values and identities. This is strategic communications at work. Strategic communications is, thus, cartography.

The relevance of such a conceptualisation of mapping/cartography and strategic communications to the Indo-Pacific is clear. The Indo-Pacific is a map in the making that charts an emerging twenty-first-century geopolitical centre of gravity. The Indo-Pacific is also a network map that is premised on connectivity (and thus also dysconnectivity) and collective memory-making, with key agencies of the region—middle powers—looking back into the past and at the same time projecting an (imagined) path towards the future through storytelling. This is strategic communications, whose central values and interests for those agencies at this current stage hinge upon the maintenance of liberal democratic values.

The Indo-Pacific, as a networked ‘space’, has attributes of both horizontal networks and hierarchy present. In such a structure, ambiguity is both
a necessary outcome and a strategic asset. Spontaneity and ambiguity signify the dynamics of power shifts in the Indo-Pacific, where influence is a more appropriate description than linear conceptions related to power and containment. International relations, under such circumstances, becomes a shaping activity. As power shifts to the Indo-Pacific in the foreseeable future, such a networked approach will increasingly gain prominence.

The Indo-Pacific is an emergent geopolitical area where mapping critically relies on storytelling and collective memory-making—stories are plural, involving multiple agencies. Yet this multiplicity does not hinder stability in the Indo-Pacific. Rather, it creates a necessary flexibility and ambiguity.