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Original Article

The Future of Asian Regionalism: Not What It Used to Be?

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Abstract

The largely unexpected election of Donald Trump as President of the United States has overturned many assumptions and expectations about the future of Australia's regional relationships. Even before Trump's election, however, the history of regional evolution in East Asia presented a number of striking paradoxes and raised important questions about the forces that encourage or obstruct integration and cooperation at the regional level. For a region that has frequently been associated with comparatively limited cross-border political institutionalization and development, East Asia has recently been the centre of a large number of initiatives and proposals that are intended to give expression to particular visions of the region. We argue that the outcome of such regional processes is profoundly influenced by both geo-economic and geopolitical forces. We illustrate this claim by looking at the history of institutional development in the 'Asia-Pacific', before considering the attempt to create a new 'Indo-Pacific region', which, we suggest, has more to do with contemporary geopolitical concerns rather than any underlying 'natural' coherence. The Australian policy-making community needs to think carefully about the implications of the Trump presidency for such initiatives.

Key words: Asia-Pacific, regionalism, Indo-Pacific, international institutions, security architecture, East Asia

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1. Introduction

One of the most striking features of the broadly conceived 'Asia-Pacific region' is that the institutions that have emerged there have been much less powerful and effective than their counterparts in Western Europe. In part, this has been a function of history and of a region divided by the Cold War. In part, it has been because many of the institutions have been deliberately designed so that they had less power than the European Union (EU), which was seen as intruding on the sovereignty of its members in ways many Asian states were keen to avoid (Katzenstein 2005). And yet, paradoxically enough, despite a relatively modest level of institutional development and effectiveness in the Asia-Pacific, there is no shortage of initiatives and competing visions about how the region might develop. The questions, as ever, are about how the region is to be defined, who its members might be and what purpose it might serve.

One of the potentially most important recent initiatives in this regard is the so-called 'Indo-Pacific' region. At this stage, the Indo-Pacific idea is very much a work-in-progress and one that will be especially difficult to realize, if the history of other regional initiatives is anything to go by. Indeed, the experience of other institutions such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum, the ASEAN Plus Three grouping and the East Asia Summit (EAS) suggests that institutional effectiveness is especially difficult to realize in the Asian neighbourhood at the best of times. It is likely to prove even more difficult during the administration of newly elected President

Donald Trump who has expressed little enthusiasm for or even knowledge about institutionalized regional forums. The one exception to this pattern has been Trump's consistent promise—or threat as far as Australia is concerned—to abandon American participation in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Significantly, China has been quick to position itself as a force for regional stability and continuity in such circumstances (Lyons et al. 2016)

The dawn of the Trump regime consequently poses profoundly difficult policy challenges for loyal American allies such as Australia, which has been assiduously developing and promoting a new regional concept based on the Indo-Pacific notion. For many Australian advocates of the Indo-Pacific idea in particular, it seemed to offer a way of keeping the United States strategically engaged while actively responding to the growing power and influence of China. Not only is there little indication that Australia's enthusiasm for the Indo-Pacific idea is likely to be reciprocated by the incoming Trump administration, however, but it also is unclear what impact the new American government will have on the existing institutional architecture and alliance relationships either. In short, the Trump era promises to present unwelcome challenges to the conventional policy-making and scholarly wisdom about the role of American power in Australia's region—no matter how it is defined.

This article considers the likely impact of the Trump presidency on the Indo-Pacific idea both as a practical basis for policy and as an illustration of the way regions are discursively created and institutionally realized. The key theoretical question in this context is about the relative importance of geopolitics as a driver of regional cooperation, especially when compared with claims about the 'functional' importance of institutionalized cooperation and the growing importance of the sort of 'geo-economic' influence that China has recently been attempting to utilize (Norris 2016). Although it is clearly difficult to say at this stage quite what impact a Trump presidency is likely to have, to judge by the comments of close advisors and some of his

early appointments to the incoming administration (Manibog 2016), a rather old-fashioned form of geopolitical power and calculation may be significant. Before considering the likely consequences for the Indo-Pacific concept, we examine the rationale for, and fate of, similar regional initiatives.

2. Regions and Their Rationales

It has become commonplace to make a distinction between forms of *regionalism* to refer to the collaborative political efforts of states and *regionalization* to refer to the actions of economic actors such as multinational corporations (Dent 2013). This essay is primarily concerned with regionalism and the self-conscious attempt to create politically defined and organized regions. In this context, institutions are a key manifestation of this goal. Establishing effective organizations is a challenging undertaking at the best of times; it is doubly so in 'East Asia' where politics and economics have been deeply integrated (Gomez 2002; Rodan & Jayasuriya 2009) and where their interaction continues to shape the environment in which cooperation does or does not occur at the regional level. It is, however, important to recognize two further possible characteristics of regional processes. First, they are not simply driven by the 'functional' needs of business—or politics, for that matter—as many of the early theorists of European integration believed (Rosamond 2005). On the contrary, regional processes can serve a variety of purposes, many of which have nothing to do with economics.

Some regions are inherently more likely than others. 'Latin America' is perhaps the quintessential example of this possibility: the sheer geography of South America seems to lend itself to the creation of patterns of cooperation and even identity that transcend the individual interests of the states that make up the region (Radcliffe & Westwood 1996). And yet relations between South American states have not always been cordial: cooperation remains limited; Mercosur has not been a very effective expression of regionalism (Phillips 2003). Some of the standard definitions of

regions that emphasize the importance of geography and contingency provide only the most rudimentary of starting points, therefore. To become something other than a simple description of different parts of the earth's surface, regions must develop the qualities of 'actorness', or the sorts of capacities that we have traditionally associated with states (van Langenhove 2013).

The ability to develop such state-like properties differs across regions, however. For all its current problems, the EU has gone further in developing such capacities than any other region. At one level, this can be explained by the fact that the EU has been attempting to develop and institutionalize such capacities for longer than any other region, and this helps explain their comparative 'thickness' and overall impact (Amin & Thrift 1994). On the other hand, however, the existence of specific preconditions, not the least of which were long-established nation-states with comparatively sophisticated bureaucratic capacities, eventually allowed Europeans to develop transnational forms of regional cooperation that have set Europe apart (Menon 2008).

The other factor that has exerted a crucial—but very different—influence on Europe and Asia has been geopolitical. The key variable in this context has been the impact of American foreign policy. In Europe, American influence had an integrative impact as a consequence of its desire to see Western Europe present a united front against what was perceived to be Soviet expansionism. The United States was able to use economic and political leverage to encourage postwar reconciliation and cooperation amongst the devastated European economies. In East Asia, by contrast, a different geopolitical agenda and a desire to preserve the region's strategic dependence on the United States effectively meant that the entire region remained divided along Cold War lines, and the sorts of integrative processes that became such a feature of the European experience never took hold (Hemmer & Katzenstein 2002; Hara 2006). Significantly, it was not until the Cold War ended and China opened up to the wider region that real economic integration and even political cooperation became possible.

The contrast between the EU's experience and that of Southeast Asia, which in the ASEAN has one of the most enduring inter-governmental organizations in the so-called 'developing world', is instructive and revealing. Both the EU and ASEAN were powerfully shaped by external geopolitical forces during their formative years, but internal differences and ideas about the purpose of regional integration led to very different outcomes. A preoccupation with internal sovereignty and nation building in an atmosphere of superpower contestation and regional instability meant that from its inception ASEAN was a sovereignty-preserving, rather than a sovereignty-pooling, entity. Indeed, there was a conscious repudiation of the sort of powerful institutional architecture that came to distinguish the EU and which exercised real power over its members. The comparatively small ASEAN Secretariat has been relatively powerless—and that is just the way its members prefer it (Beeson 2009). The point to emphasize is that this diplomatic tradition and the need to win the support of the ASEAN states for any new regional initiative has generally ensured that new organizations and initiatives have little capacity to influence the behaviour of members.

The key question when thinking about the prospects for new initiatives such as the Indo-Pacific concept, therefore, is about what is driving them and how effective they are likely to be. Given the comparative absence of 'geo-economic' factors—or the application of economic instruments to advance geopolitical ends (Blackwill & Harris 2016: 8)—in the discourse around the Indo-Pacific concept, greater explanatory weight and rhetorical legitimation fall on the geopolitical side of the ledger. The region's history suggests that this will not be an unprecedented development should it come to pass. On the contrary, for all ASEAN's lofty rhetoric about cooperation around economic development, cultural and social exchange and technical cooperation, for example, the real driver of political cooperation in Southeast Asia was and arguably still is security cooperation. In 1967 when ASEAN was inaugurated, the Vietnam War was in full swing and there were genuine, albeit overblown in retrospect,

fears that communist expansion would sweep all before it (Narine 2002).

The establishment of ASEAN promised to help resolve intra-regional tensions while giving the insecure states of Southeast Asia a higher profile and presence in a wider region of which it was a hitherto subordinate part (Beeson 2009). Perhaps the most significant innovation to come out of ASEAN was its diplomatic *modus operandi*. The ‘ASEAN Way’ of consensus, voluntarism and consultation has, for better or worse, become the default form of interaction at the intergovernmental level in ASEAN itself and the other regional initiatives that eventually followed in its wake (Haacke 2003). Indeed, the price of gaining ASEAN’s participation in other regional initiatives was an explicit recognition of the sort of ‘cultural sensitivities’ that made ASEAN’s leaders allergic to the sort of legalism preferred by Western states such as the United States and Australia (Kahler 2000). Such acquiescence has arguably undermined the effectiveness of other organizations as it had with ASEAN itself, and helps account for the notorious ineffectiveness and impact of regional bodies in the Asia-Pacific. It also helps account for the ambivalent attitude of successive American administrations toward regional institutions, a reality that is unlikely to change under Donald Trump. The recent history of the EAS provides an important illustration of this possibility.

2.1. *The EAS: The Continuing Influence of the ‘Offshore Balancer’*

A number of events—all of which are essentially geopolitical, rather than functional—have given the EAS a prominence that is both unexpected and unjustified, to judge by its actual impact, at least. The key development in this context, as with the Indo-Pacific idea, as we shall see, has been the ‘rise of China’. Not only has China become the lynchpin of East Asia’s increasingly integrated production networks (Henderson & Nadvi 2011), but it also has become a much more significant strategic player and concomitant source of unease among its neighbours. More significantly, China’s rise is also a growing source of

concern for the United States, and it is this that has suddenly raised the profile of the EAS.

When the EAS was initially promoted by a Malaysian government that had famously had problematic relations with the United States over a number of years, the United States was conspicuously absent from the list of potential members. While this may have reflected both regional and American priorities in the mid-2000s, it is a reminder of just how quickly the strategic calculus can change in this part of the world. The United States rather belatedly turned its attention to the most economically dynamic and strategically significant region in the world (Le Mière 2013). The shorthand for this change of strategic focus was ‘the pivot’ (Campbell 2016). The preferred nomenclature became ‘rebalance’, a term slightly less encumbered by the sort of discursive baggage that gave geopolitics such a bad name during the twentieth century. But however, the United States’ priorities during the administration of Barak Obama were described; one expression of this impulse was the desire to develop new connections with the East Asian region. Importantly, it is a position that has been directly repudiated by close advisors to the Trump administration (Gray and Navarro 2016).

Yet for many of East Asia’s less powerful states, America’s renewed strategic and institutional re-engagement was undoubtedly a welcome development. Even Vietnam has assiduously cultivated closer strategic ties with the United States as it has become increasingly nervous about what it sees as Chinese aggression over the unresolved territorial claims that plague intra-regional relations (Perlez 2016). The United States was also keen to demonstrate its willingness to fulfil its role as what has been described as an ‘offshore balancer’ (Layne 1997; Mearsheimer & Walt 2016). Yet as the recent anti-American declarations of the Philippines’ unpredictable President Rodrigo Duterte demonstrate, this is a complex proposition (Moss 2016). Nevertheless, for many strategic analysts—especially in the United States—the idea that Asia could remain stable without America’s tangible strategic presence in the region is essentially unthinkable (Ikenberry 2004; Friedberg 2011).

Generations of scholars and policy-makers in the United States have assumed that America provides the geopolitical glue that stops an inherently fissiparous region from tearing itself apart. China's rise threatens—inevitably and inescapably, according to some prominent analysts (Mearsheimer 2010)—to undermine the established order with potentially catastrophic consequences.

While geopolitical forces may have given new and unexpected prominence to a hitherto marginal and seemingly redundant institution, it is not clear whether this will make it any more effective—especially in the all-too-likely eventuality that the Trump administration remains unenthusiastic about multilateral approaches to foreign policy (Ferrier 2016). On the contrary, the expansion of the grouping—a process with which China seems entirely comfortable—looks set to undermine the EAS in precisely the same way that APEC's continued membership expansion did (Bisley 2012). At least, APEC initially had a more or less coherent economic agenda, even if it was one many of its members had little interest in. The EAS, by contrast, would seem to have little real purpose or rationale other than providing a vehicle for states such as the United States, India and Australia to engage with East Asia and potentially 'contain' China's rise. Given that the EAS does little other than meet, this looks like a triumph of hope over experience. Indeed, it is precisely the lack of impact of existing regional institutions that has underpinned the development of yet more initiatives and proposals about how 'the region' might be conceived and the purposes to which such conceptions could be put. Whether they are any more likely to succeed or endure it is a moot point given the history of such initiatives in Asia.

3. The Rise of the Indo-Pacific

There are a number of important issues that emerge from the preceding discussion that are worth re-emphasizing before going further. First, as in the past (Beeson 2006), there are a number of competing visions of 'the region'. As a consequence, its boundaries remain

uncertain, contested, and contingent. Second, such differences are reflected in the memberships and goals of the various organizations and initiatives that have recently emerged. There is a noteworthy difference between initiatives that are driven by economic goals—APEC, the TPP; and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)—and those that have a more strategic focus, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the Indo-Pacific. Either way, however, it is equally noteworthy that both China and the United States would rather deal bilaterally or minilaterally, recognizing that wider multilateral settings have the potential to reduce their relative influence. Third, even where the membership and boundaries of organizations are more settled, there is equally long-standing scepticism about their effectiveness and actual influence over their members. Indeed, ASEAN's own 'widening' process has further compromised its capacity for the sort of 'deepening' that famously characterized the EU in its heyday. Under such circumstances, one might be forgiven for wondering why there are so many *existing* regional initiatives, let alone an apparent enthusiasm for developing new ones. Paradoxically enough, however, that is precisely what has occurred with the development of the 'Indo-Pacific'.

Whatever actual policy or strategic impact the Indo-Pacific idea may (or may not) eventually have, its rather unexpected and recent emergence is a boon for students of comparative regionalism, of which there is a growing number (Sbragia 2008; Acharya 2012). It is, after all, not every day that we get to see a self-conscious effort to create a region out of nothing, or very little, at least. Even APEC and Kevin Rudd's abortive Asia-Pacific Community initiative at least had something to work with as far as pre-existing ideas were concerned: not only has the idea of the 'Asia-Pacific' as a mobilizing discourse been around for a while, but energetic 'policy entrepreneurs' and 'ideas brokers' also have toiled valiantly to give substance, or 'actorness', to an otherwise insubstantial concept. The Indo-Pacific can claim no such antecedents, despite the fact that there are a number of

people working energetically in the United States, Japan, India and (especially) Australia to try and change this.

At the outset, therefore, there are reasons for being sceptical about the Indo-Pacific's prospects. First, the enormous geographical expanse that the Indo-Pacific represents makes it unworkable as the basis for an effective strategic order (Yoshihara 2013). Second, the Indo-Pacific draws together South Asia and the Indian Ocean with East Asia and the Western Pacific Ocean, which remain two distinct and therefore separate strategic systems; it has been persuasively argued (Phillips 2016, White 2016). Third, with most of its focus on the maritime aspect of Asia, the Indo-Pacific does not pay enough attention to continental Asia especially the activities of China in that area (Bisley 2016). Finally, there is no distinct institutional basis for the Indo-Pacific thus far, although some of the most energetic and enthusiastic supporters of the idea in academia and some influential think tanks argue that some extant institutions such as the EAS and the ARF reflect 'an essentially Indo-Pacific footprint' (Medcalf 2012: 5). The ARF is notionally supposed to be dedicated to security issues but has had remarkably little impact in addressing them; it has been largely ineffective, primarily because it follows the ASEAN Way and studiously avoids dealing with issues that might discomfort its members (Emmers & Tan 2011). There is no reason a priori to suppose that any new or expanded grouping is likely to prove any more effective.

Nevertheless, the Indo-Pacific has some potentially influential advocates. Australia has played a surprisingly prominent role in attempting to discursively create regional identities and encourage the development of regional institutions. In addition to helping construct the idea of the 'Asia-Pacific' region and establishing APEC (Ravenhill 2001), the Australian governments played a role in the creation of the ARF, which, despite the shortcomings noted earlier, potentially remains the region's most important security institution. The fact that Australian officials and policy entrepreneurs are at the forefront of efforts to promote the Indo-Pacific is, therefore, not so

surprising—especially given Australia's central geographic position in this putative region. For supporters of the concept, the Indo-Pacific is 'best understood as an expansive definition of a maritime super-region centered on Southeast Asia, arising principally from the emergence of China and India as outward-looking trading states and strategic actors' (Medcalf 2014: 474).

For Australian officials in particular, Australia's centrality in the Indo-Pacific gives a welcome prominence to its generally neglected west coast and reinforces its status as an Indian Ocean state. Former defense minister and ambassador to the United States Kim Beazley was at the forefront of refocusing Australia's strategic outlook westwards, and it is no coincidence that two of Australia's most recent foreign ministers—Stephen Smith and Julie Bishop—have also come from Western Australia. Yet despite such bipartisan support and its near total replacement of the 'Asia-Pacific' in the 2013 and 2016 Defence White Papers, the Indo-Pacific initiative thus far lacks any significant institutional presence. Despite this, the Australian government, or more specifically its defense establishment, has been at the forefront of promoting the Indo-Pacific idea (Australian Government 2013, 2016). The possible strategic significance of the Indo-Pacific for Australian defense policy was made clear in the 2016 White Paper. According to the review, Australia's primary defense interests are predicated on

a stable Indo-Pacific region and rules-based global order which supports Australia's interests. The Indo-Pacific includes North Asia, the South China Sea and the extensive sea lines of communication in the Indian and Pacific Oceans that support Australian trade. A stable rules-based regional order is critical to ensuring Australia's access to an open, free and secure trading system and minimising the risk of coercion and instability that would directly affect Australia's interests. A stable rules-based global order serves to deal with threats before they become existential threats to Australia, and enables our unfettered access to trading routes, secure communications and transport to support Australia's economic development. (Australian Government 2016, 70).

Broadly similar assumptions underpin the positions of Indo-Pacific advocates in the

United States, Japan and India too. In his speech to the Indian parliament titled 'Confluence of the Two Seas', Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was one of the earliest and most vocal proponents in conceiving of the 'two seas' as a single strategic space (Abe 2007). Under former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, the rather awkward formulation 'Indo-Asia-Pacific' was used when referring to the region (Clinton 2010). Perhaps the greatest recent champion for the concept is Indian PM Narendra Modi, who in a speech before US Congress in 2016 argued that 'a strong India-U.S. partnership can anchor peace, prosperity and stability from Asia to Africa and from Indian Ocean to the Pacific' (Modi 2016). While a number of states have begun to adopt the language, therefore, the actual implementation of the 'Indo-Pacific' concept into their defense and foreign policy strategies is another matter entirely.

Part of the problem revolves around the differing conceptions of what the Indo-Pacific is and how it might be operationalised. Andrew Phillips (2016) is one of the more astute observers of these developments, and he has usefully developed a typology of different approaches to the 'Indo-Pacific' idea. First, there are those who argue that the connection between the Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific is too tenuous to justify a reinterpretation of the region's strategic environment away from the 'Asia-Pacific'. Second, a functionalist approach places a priority on seeking cooperation in areas such as maintaining the integrity of maritime/energy sea lines of communication (SLOC) and promoting effortless connectivity between the Indian Ocean and the East Asian economies. A third perspective views the Indo-Pacific in pure balance of power terms and strongly advocates the need to effectively manage the perceived adverse effects associated with China's rise. Finally, there are those who think of the Indo-Pacific as an arena in which a concert of powers system might be developed, in which there is greater scope for interdependence between the two regions and there is more capacity to accommodate China's rise as a major power in the region. The point to emphasize is that such fundamental

differences of opinion about the nature and possible role of the Indo-Pacific makes it less likely to be realized effectively.

Chengxin Pan (2014) argues that at this juncture, it is hard to escape the conclusion that the Indo-Pacific trope 'is designed primarily to enable the United States and its regional allies to "naturally" strengthen and expand their existing regional alliance networks in order to hedge against a perceived China-centric regional order in Asia'. In an institutional sense, this has played out in a series of mainly bilateral and trilateral groupings involving the so-called Quadrilateral states (United States, Australia, Japan and India) including the 'Malabar Exercises' (Brewster 2016; Parameswaran 2016). In other words, the overwhelming rationale for the Indo-Pacific thus far has been strategic and geopolitical and designed to extend and reinforce American-led military primacy and to balance against the rise of China.

3.1. Trump and the Indo-Pacific

As President-elect Trump grapples with key appointments in his incoming White House administration, the nature of his impact on the region remains one of the great known unknowns. From an Australian perspective, however, the stakes could hardly be higher or the consequences more significant. The Trump presidency has the potential to produce greater 'shocks' even than the Nixon presidency, which witnessed the entirely unexpected Guam Doctrine and the rapprochement with China (Jackson 2016), upending many of the apparent certainties about America's role in the region in the process. Although Trump has questioned the efficacy of alliances, he has not explicitly advocated that the United States abandon its allies and partners in Asia thus far, at least (Jae-soon 2016). Whether or not one accepts the depiction of his more 'transactional' approach to international diplomacy and security as a 'protection racket' (Patrick 2016), it is clear that it is potentially profoundly challenging for the likes of Australia. The difficulty of making sense of possible foreign policy under Trump has been compounded by

a simultaneous promise to expand significantly the number of vessels in the US navy (Stewart & Creighton 2016). If the regime can find the money for such a project, it suggests an American withdrawal from the region remains an unlikely prospect, even if the expectations of alliance partners are radically increased.

Whether the 'Indo-Pacific' concept can endure in light of the growing sense of uncertainty that a Trump presidency brings to the region is a complex question. The impact of Trump on the Indo-Pacific largely depends on the resilience and effectiveness of its diverse institutional architecture and is likely to vary dependent on the particular institution in question. However, in promising to remove the United States from the TPP and by overturning the painstakingly negotiated agreement with Iran to abandon its pursuit of nuclear weapons, the preference for bilateralism, even unilateralism over multilateralism in both the trade and security realms, is becoming clearer (Brown 2016; Ferrier 2016). The implications for a 'middle power' such as Australia, which has invested enormous energy and political capital in trying to create robust multilateral institutions in its region over many years, are potentially profound and almost entirely negative.

From the highly influential perspective of what Nick Bisley described as the 'Canberra consensus', or the mainstream defense orthodoxy, perhaps the best that can be hoped for is that the recent emergence of comprehensive strategic partnerships between India and the United States (2016), Japan (2014) and Australia (2014) may receive some additional impetus. After being dissolved in 2008 by Kevin Rudd, India–United States relations expert Vivek Mishra (2016) argues that

If the Trump Administration does maintain U.S. engagements with Asia, it is possible that the Quadrilateral Defense Initiative (QDI) could see a revival, bringing together the United States, Japan, Australia and India once again, albeit with rehashed intents, capabilities and promises.

A reinvigorated four-way Malabar Exercise could give the Indo-Pacific some much-needed institutional momentum. In addition, the multitude of bilateral strategic partnerships forged

between the 'Quad' states and other maritime East Asian states over the past few years might give a more tangible expression to the Indo-Pacific construct. Importantly, these strategic partnerships are flexible. They do not compel partner states to come to the defense of an ally and can potentially evolve with changing circumstances around specific issues. The recent growth in the number of strategic partnerships (rather than formal alliances) between the Philippines, Korea, Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, which are linked to the Quad states, might also give substance to the Indo-Pacific concept. In this context, admirers of strategic partnerships stress the flexibility of such relationships and the fact that they can be renegotiated without affecting the overall coherence of the region as a whole (Envall & Hall 2016).

Two other 'Indo-Pacific' strategic relationships may be increasingly important in the Trump era. The still emerging but now crucial Tokyo–New Delhi relationship could reinforce the Indo-Pacific concept and shore up a possibly irresolute Trump presidency's commitment to the region (Smith 2016). Prime ministers Modi and Abe have formed a close relationship; both are currently popular leaders and could be in power for some time to come. Equally importantly for the purposes of this discussion, both have held firm in their conviction that the Indo-Pacific regional idea has continuing relevance. Indeed, during Modi's recent visit to Tokyo in November 2016, the joint India–Japan statement 'underscored the rising importance of the Indo-Pacific region as the key driver for the prosperity of the world ... [and] the convergence in our strategic interests in the broad expanse of the waters of the Indo-Pacific' (Indian Government 2016).

It is also significant that the Washington DC–New Delhi relationship has continuously improved through the George Bush Jr and Obama administrations since undergoing rapprochement under Bill Clinton in 2000. Indeed, with the 2016 signing of the bilateral Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement, strategic ties between the United States and India have never been more entrenched (Pant 2016). Nevertheless, Trump's ideas regarding the

United States–India relationship remain unknown, and the ongoing upward trajectory of the relationship is uncertain. Although labelled bizarre by some, Trump's noteworthy focus on India during the US election, in which he also spoke Hindi in a video message, does show that India at least has his attention (Jha 2016).

It is indicative of how little we know with any certainty about Trump's intentions or ideas about foreign policy that we are reduced to attempting to make sense of apparently trivial indicators of his possible preferences. At the time of writing, it is still not clear who his Secretary of State will be, or who—if anyone—is likely to influence his thinking about American foreign policy generally, let alone about a region he seems to have relatively little understanding or interest—however it is defined. Such uncertainty could, or indeed, *should*, trigger a major debate about foreign and strategic policy in Australia. Hitherto, security policy in particular has enjoyed bipartisan support and rested on the untested and rather complacent assumption that the United States is the entirely predictable and reliable bedrock of our national posture. Whatever else the Trump presidency might produce, it may finally trigger an overdue debate among Australia's strategic and foreign policy elites about the merits and viability of existing policy settings. This would be no small achievement.

4. Concluding Remarks

If regions are anything more than simple geographical descriptors, they are inescapably discursive, contingent and contested creations. Deciding who is a member and who is not, what form any institution may take and what purpose it might be put to are all ultimately political questions. There is, in short, nothing 'natural' or inevitable about the precise shape or purpose of regions, even if some are more inherently plausible than others. The history of the 'Asia-Pacific' region reveals the complex—sometimes incompatible—economic, political, and strategic logics within which different regional visions and institutions actually evolve (Beeson 2006). If this is to be the so-called Asian century, at this stage, it is unclear

what institutional form 'Asia' will take or whether it will have the capacity to act in any coherent or effective manner. To judge from the history of regional innovations over the last three or four decades caution, if not outright scepticism, about the prospects for further institutional development seems warranted.

It was not hard to identify the forces that might undermine effective regional cooperation even before Donald Trump's ascension. No matter how the region in question might be defined or how desirable such cooperation might be, realizing such goals remains a challenge at the best of times. Growing strategic rivalry between China and the United States, unresolved territorial claims, the poisonous historical legacy of Asia's bloody intra-regional conflicts, to say nothing of a host of environmental and economic problems that make internal social stability far from certain have created a web of inter-connected issues that would challenge the ablest of regionally oriented policy-makers. Those regional elites that have always been cautious and concerned about the implications of creating powerful, European-style institutions no doubt view the EU's current unresolved problems with a sense of vindication. Whatever the merits of such views, the EU's influence as a role model for intra-regional cooperation has been undermined and any limited enthusiasm for replicating the EU's developmental trajectory has been effectively snuffed out for the foreseeable future (Beeson & Stone 2013).

Does this mean the end of regional cooperation and institutional innovation in this part of the world? Far from it, to judge by the growing number of proposals for regional organizations and cooperative agreements. Indeed, if nothing else, the Indo-Pacific initiative stands as a prominent example of the continuing efforts by particular states and other actors to champion one sort of regional vision or another. The key question, as ever, is whether any regional vision will enjoy widespread support and whether it can be actually be operationalised. As with its predecessors, the fate and potential efficacy of the Indo-Pacific initiative is far from clear, despite the enthusiastic efforts of its champions in Australia. At

this stage, it has no institutional presence and little compelling rationale other than providing a rationale for a strategic mobilization in response to the rise of China.

What this suggests is that different economic and strategic priorities will prevail at different historical moments, and these will influence the sorts of regional institutions that result as a consequence. The quintessential exemplar of this possibility is the emergence of the EU in the aftermath of the Second World War. However, it is also a reminder that nothing is inevitable about the impact of competing geo-economic or geopolitical imperatives. It seems unlikely that the powerful geopolitical currents that are presently washing through the proposed Indo-Pacific region will encourage a similar process of institutionalized regional cooperation. On the contrary, the alliance relationships that underpin the Indo-Pacific idea look more like Europe before the First World War than Europe after the Second (Beeson 2014).

There are, however, still many reasons to believe that the regional institutional architecture could become more dense in the future and possibly even more effective, the election of Donald Trump notwithstanding. After all, regions as effective political actors have their uses. It is important to remember that the much-derided EU still represents the most important and even inspiring experiment in international cooperation the world has ever seen: not only has it facilitated the remarkable economic development of Western Europe, but it also has underpinned peace and stability in what has historically been one of the most violent regions on the planet. If 'Asia' is to maintain its economic momentum and resolve some of its enduring intra-regional tensions, effective institutions look like essential parts of the process. Whether the key actors that make up any region can actually learn to cooperate effectively in pursuit of such collective goals is another question.

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