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Regional Security Outlook

One Region,
Different Narratives,
and the Way Forward
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COUNCIL FOR
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IN THE ASIA PACIFIC



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ONE REGION, DIFFERENT NARRATIVES, AND THE WAY FORWARD

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The Indo-Pacific¹ has emerged as the focal point of global strategic competition. It is widely portrayed as a contested space—shaped by great-power rivalries, shifting alignments, and overlapping security architectures. Yet this framing overlooks a crucial dimension. The region is not only a battleground of material power but also of meaning—a site of contestation over the narratives states and actors tell about order, identity, and the future. These strategic narratives are not mere “cheap talk”; they shape how threats are perceived, alliances justified, and legitimacy constructed.

¹ Even the terminology used by major powers reflects competing strategic visions. The United States and some partners deliberately promote the term “Indo-Pacific” to signal maritime connectivity and a multipolar regional vision inclusive of India. China, by contrast, consistently uses “Asia” or “Asia-Pacific,” reinforcing a Sino-centric framework anchored in continental logic.

This region has become the battleground for competing visions—from the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” to China’s “Community of Shared Future for Mankind” to ASEAN’s more understated inclusive regionalism. Understanding the region’s security landscape, therefore, requires more than tracking naval exercises or trade flows—it demands attention to the narrative architectures that shape state behaviour and the evolving regional order.

Strategic Narratives and the Indo-Pacific’s Fragmented Narrative Landscape

Strategic narratives are structured storylines through which actors make sense of their role in the world and project their vision of international order. They link a nation’s past experiences, present policies, and future aspirations into a coherent framework that explains and justifies behaviour (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle 2013). Unlike propaganda or ad hoc rhetoric, strategic narratives are enduring, institutionalized, and performative: they shape not only how a state sees itself, but how it wants to be seen by others. As such, they serve both as tools of persuasion and as mechanisms for structuring alignment, legitimacy, and action in international affairs.

These narratives typically operate on three levels: the systemic, which articulates a vision of the international order; the national, which defines a state’s identity and strategic purpose; and the issue-specific, which targets discrete domains such as maritime security, infrastructure, or climate cooperation. In the Indo-Pacific, these levels often blur: visions of regional order are inseparable from questions of national identity and domain-specific interests. For example, the promotion of a “rules-based order” is simultaneously a systemic ideal, a national value for many liberal democracies, and a basis for maritime claims.

At the systemic level, this region is shaped most visibly by the tension between two broad strategic narratives—each advanced by a major power bloc with global ambitions. The first is the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP), initially proposed by then-Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan in 2007 and revived in 2016 as a response to China’s growing assertiveness in the East and South China Seas (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2007). FOIP has since been embraced and adapted by the United States, Australia, and India, becoming the conceptual backbone of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and, more recently, AUKUS. Its core tenets—freedom of navigation, rule of law, respect for sovereignty, and the promotion of liberal-democratic values—are designed to uphold a “rules-based order” in the face of what its proponents see as coercive state behaviour and the erosion of international norms.

However, FOIP is not a monolith. While Japan and the United States converge on many of its principles, they diverge subtly in emphasis. Japan foregrounds connectivity, development, and maritime capacity-building—often extending these initiatives to ASEAN and Africa. The US, particularly under the Biden administration, leaned more explicitly into the security dimension, embedding FOIP within the broader strategy of strategic competition with China (US Department of State 2019). Despite these differences, both the US and Japan aim to construct a

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Former UN Secretary General and Chairman of the Boao Forum for Asia Ban Ki-moon speaks during the opening ceremony of the Boao Forum for Asia (BFA) Annual Conference 2025 in Boao, in southern China's Hainan province on March 27, 2025. (Photo by AFP) / China OUT (Photo by STR/AFP via Getty Images).

regional order that is open, pluralistic, and favourable to the preservation of liberal international norms. Yet some critics argue that FOIP, particularly in its American articulation, risks becoming a thinly veiled containment strategy—limiting its appeal to actors wary of choosing sides in a binary geopolitical framework.

To counter FOIP, China has advanced its narrative of a “Community of Shared Future for Mankind,” which has evolved since 2013 into the overarching discursive framework of Chinese foreign policy (Xinhua 2017). Introduced by Xi Jinping in the context of China’s rise as a global power, the narrative seeks to present China as a benevolent force advancing mutual development, civilizational respect, and stability—especially for countries in the Global South. Its core themes include non-interference, respect for the diversity of political systems, and the rejection of zero-sum thinking. While ostensibly universal, the narrative is most visible in the Indo-Pacific through mechanisms like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Global Development Initiative, and forums such as the Boao Forum for Asia.

Rather than a direct ideological counterpoint to FOIP, the “Shared Future” narrative presents itself as an alternative architecture—one in which the regional order is based not on universal liberal norms, but on a more flexible, sovereignty-respecting form of interdependence. Yet this posture is not merely defensive. It implicitly critiques the selective application of rules by Western powers, positions China as a civilization equal or superior to the West, and offers material incentives to reinforce normative alignment.

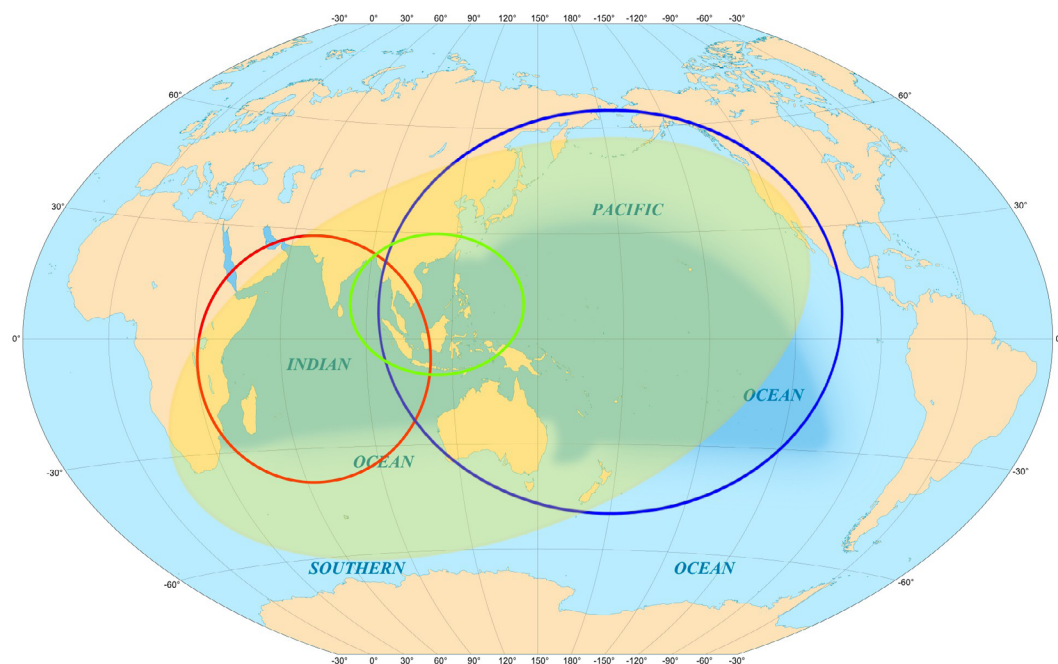


Photo by Eric Gaba via Wikimedia Commons (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Indo-Pacific_map_outlines_with_ASEAN_overlay.jpg).

The result is a dynamic interplay between the two narratives: FOIP positions itself as a bulwark against coercion, while China's narrative recasts such bulwarks as exclusionary blocs designed to preserve Western primacy. This contest manifests not only in rhetorical clashes—such as duelling statements at regional summits—but also in competing institution-building and connectivity strategies. The US and its partners promote initiatives like the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) and the Blue Dot Network as alternatives to Chinese-led infrastructure development under the BRI. Meanwhile, China leverages financial inducements and diplomatic forums such as the Boao Forum to draw regional actors into its orbit, often rejecting FOIP-affiliated efforts as attempts to impose “Cold War thinking.” The result is a narrative environment where actors are pressured to align not just materially but ideationally—choosing between two visions that increasingly define the boundaries of strategic legitimacy.

A third, more understated narrative framework comes from ASEAN through its “ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific” (AOIP), adopted in 2019 (ASEAN Secretariat 2019). The AOIP neither opposes nor endorses FOIP or China's narrative explicitly; instead, it attempts to carve out conceptual space for ASEAN's role as a convener and stabilizing force. The Outlook is rooted in ASEAN's long-standing principles: openness, inclusivity, respect for sovereignty, and the centrality of ASEAN-led mechanisms such as the East Asia Summit (EAS) and ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). It identifies four key areas for practical cooperation—maritime cooperation, connectivity, sustainable development, and economic collaboration—positioning ASEAN not as a geopolitical bloc, but as a facilitator of functional partnerships across strategic divides.

The AOIP is not a grand narrative of order in the same way FOIP or “the Community of Shared Future” are. It lacks overt ideological ambition and a strong normative claim about how the international system should be organized. However, by downplaying ideological confrontation and emphasizing cooperation on shared challenges, the AOIP seeks to soften the edges of great-power rivalry while reinforcing ASEAN’s role as an agenda-setter in regional diplomacy. In doing so, it embodies what might be called a “process-based narrative”—one that privileges rules of interaction over the substance of alignment.

Beyond ASEAN, middle powers such as India, Australia, and South Korea have advanced strategic narratives that assert autonomy while navigating great-power rivalry. India’s Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative emphasizes practical cooperation (e.g., in maritime security, connectivity, and disaster resilience), projecting a vision of inclusive regional leadership rooted in strategic independence. While Australia subscribes to FOIP and AUKUS, it also supports multilateral initiatives like IPEF and the EAS to maintain regional inclusivity. South Korea’s 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy marked a shift toward values-based engagement, though with continued hedging on China. These narratives act as strategic improvisations: flexible, issue-driven, and designed to widen maneuvering space in a polarized environment. While none are hegemonic, they dilute the dominant narratives and incrementally reshape the regional discourse.

The Indo-Pacific today is best understood as a dynamic narrative ecosystem—one marked not by a single storyline, but by the interaction of competing and overlapping visions. This narrative competition materializes in ways that are both subtle and consequential. For example, the lack of shared framing of maritime norms and legal interpretations has hindered progress on the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea, as involved parties dispute not just interests but the conceptual foundations of regional order. Similarly, regional digital governance remains fragmented, as divergent narratives shape the adoption of technical standards, data-sovereignty regimes, and cyber-cooperation agreements. These are not merely policy gaps—they are downstream effects of clashing storylines about what the region is, who gets to lead, and how cooperation should be structured.

Risks of Narrative Fragmentation and the Way Forward

The growing diversity of strategic narratives heightens the risk that the same actions are interpreted through incompatible frames. A naval exercise described as deterrence in one narrative becomes evidence of encirclement in another. This narrative asymmetry erodes mutual trust, muddles signalling, and heightens the risk of misperception—particularly in flashpoints like the South China Sea or the Taiwan Strait. While the dominant tension lies between FOIP and China’s “Community of Shared Future,” the ecosystem is more complex than a binary rivalry. Middle-power narratives—such as India’s Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative or ASEAN’s AOIP—may lack coercive weight but still challenge hegemonic frames by offering alternative focal points (like connectivity, sustainability, or multipolar dialogue). The result is not just bilateral competition, but an overlapping, multidirectional contest over how the region

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is described, which norms should guide behaviour, and whose vision of legitimacy carries weight. In this sense, narrative diversity expands agency—but also complicates the search for shared understanding.

Narrative fragmentation also carries the risk of exclusion and institutional erosion. Hegemonic narratives such as FOIP or the “Community of Shared Future” encode normative preferences that may alienate states unwilling to fully endorse them. Smaller actors—especially in Southeast Asia and the Pacific—can find themselves marginalized in a discourse that increasingly revolves around major-power binaries. Even ASEAN’s AOIP, which explicitly rejects bloc politics, has struggled to gain discursive traction outside ASEAN-led forums (Hoang 2022). Meanwhile, the rise of minilateralism and ad hoc groupings has sidelined inclusive regional institutions, threatening long-term coherence and undermining confidence in multilateral diplomacy.

This pluralism need not lead to paralysis (i.e., total diplomatic gridlock), but could create a scenario where normative fragmentation undermines institutional coherence and weakens trust among regional actors. For example, when states attach fundamentally different meanings to concepts like “freedom of navigation” or “inclusivity,” it becomes more difficult to achieve consensus on rules or joint action—especially in times of crisis. This risk is not hypothetical. The absence of coordinated narrative framing has already slowed cooperation on cross-domain challenges like pandemic response, critical-minerals governance, and AI ethics. However, this is a risk that can be mitigated—provided the region invests in platforms and habits of dialogue that acknowledge and manage, rather than suppress, narrative diversity.

Moving forward does not demand a single shared narrative, but it does require skillful management of narrative diversity. This requires creating platforms for bridging strategic narratives—spaces where competing visions can overlap or converge on shared challenges. Maritime cooperation, climate governance, AI norms, and pandemic resilience offer concrete issue areas where even ideologically distant actors can find common ground. ASEAN-led institutions and platforms such as the EAS, ARF, and other Track 1.5 forums, including the ASEAN Future Forum and the Asia-Pacific Roundtable, can play a pivotal role not only in coordinating policy, but in coordinating meaning—shared understandings of legitimacy, order, and cooperation.

To move forward, the region needs more than shared interests—it needs strategic narrative stewardship: the intentional curation of discursive space where multiple visions can coexist without collapsing into zero-sum competition. This means investing in institutions that do not just coordinate policy, but mediate meaning—clarifying how terms like “order,” “freedom,” or “development” are differently understood across actors. ASEAN is well-suited to this task, not as a hegemon or enforcer, but as a discursive convener. Platforms like the EAS and ASEAN Future Forum can serve as venues where narrative tensions are broached, translated, and managed. Stewardship here does not mean convergence—it means ensuring that the region’s diversity of perspectives becomes a source of stability rather than confusion.

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ASEAN is perhaps uniquely positioned to play the role of regional narrative-bridger—not despite its cautious, consensus-driven style, but because of it. Rather than shy away from the Indo-Pacific framing, ASEAN should continue to assert ownership over it. By articulating a version of the Indo-Pacific that emphasizes inclusivity, openness, and developmental cooperation—while moderating its more adversarial undertones—ASEAN can defuse narrative confrontation while enhancing its strategic relevance. This would not weaken ASEAN centrality, but reinforce it: not as a driver of power politics, but as a steward of meaning and mediator of visions. In a region defined by strategic flux, discursive agility may be ASEAN’s most important asset—and its most credible contribution to regional order.



US Secretary of State Marco Rubio (2R) stands alongside Indo-Pacific Quad ministers, L-R, Japanese Foreign Minister Iwama Takeshi, Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar and Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong, during a photo opportunity before meetings at the State Department in Washington, DC, on January 21, 2025. (Photo by ANDREW CABALLERO-REYNOLDS / AFP) (Photo by ANDREW CABALLERO-REYNOLDS/AFP via Getty Images).

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