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Indo-Pacific vs Global South: China–ASEAN Geopolitical Horizons

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Author: Prof. Dr. Chhem Kieth Rethy

Senior Advisor, China-ASEAN Studies Center

Introduction

This short essay offers a concise exploration of the philosophical foundations underpinning two competing geopolitical imaginaries that shape contemporary global politics: the Indo-Pacific and the Global South. Although often presented as strategic frameworks, they are in fact constructed worlds animated by different ontologies, epistemologies, and historical experiences. The Indo-Pacific arises from a security-driven logic of deterrence and maritime strategy, while the Global South emerges from post-colonial solidarity and a shared commitment to justice and development. Understanding these deeper philosophical roots allows us to see how these frameworks produce different interpretations of order, power, and international responsibility. It also helps explain the unique position of China and ASEAN as they navigate a world increasingly defined by conceptual rather than territorial boundaries.

1. Ontology: Competing Realities

The Indo-Pacific and the Global South are two competing geopolitical constructs with distinct ontological foundations. The Indo-Pacific emerged as a strategic vision primarily articulated by the United States, Japan, Australia, and India to reframe the Asia-Pacific into a broader maritime and security-oriented region. It draws ontologically from the logic of containment, deterrence, and freedom of navigation, particularly in response to China's rise.

By contrast, the Global South is ontologically rooted in post-colonial solidarity and historical experiences of marginalization. The concept draws from the Bandung Conference of 1955 and the Non-Aligned Movement, emphasizing collective agency, development, and anti-imperial resistance. It is less a fixed geography than a political and moral identity constructed through shared histories of underdevelopment, colonialism, and aspirations for a just global order. While the Indo-Pacific prioritizes states and their military postures, the Global South emphasizes peoples, communities, and developmental justice.

2. Epistemology: Knowledge Frameworks and Worldviews

The epistemology of the Indo-Pacific is derived from realist international relations thought. It privileges the production of knowledge through military strategy, security doctrines, think tank reports, and policy analyses concerned with power projection, great-power rivalry, and balance of forces. This epistemic framework views the world as a space of threats, competition, and maritime control. The use of terms like "free and open Indo-Pacific" often embeds normative assumptions favoring liberal democratic order while excluding alternative civilizational or developmental logics. (de Sousa Santos, 2014)

On the other hand, the Global South's epistemology is deeply informed by postcolonial theory, development studies, and civilizational pluralism. It seeks to decenter Euro-American knowledge systems by foregrounding indigenous perspectives, Southern epistemes, and experiential knowledge of inequality and resistance. This perspective does not reduce global politics to binary power blocs but introduces multi-layered understandings of justice, climate vulnerability,

sovereignty, and relational ethics. It often finds expression in climate diplomacy, South–South cooperation, and calls to reform institutions like the UN, IMF, and WTO.

3. The New Cold War: Strategic Realignment and Resistance

The resurgence of great-power competition between the United States and China has been widely described as a "New Cold War." The Indo-Pacific is the primary theater of this emerging rivalry. The Indo-Pacific framework enables Washington and its allies to assemble coalitions such as the Quad and AUKUS to contain China's influence across trade, technology, and military domains. This framework resonates with Cold War-style thinking, presenting the world as bifurcated into democratic and authoritarian camps, pushing countries to "choose sides." (Acharya, 2017). This dynamic reflects what Mahbubani (2020) identifies as Washington's struggle to accept China's rise and the growing reluctance of many nations to be drawn into a binary confrontation.

However, the Global South resists this binary alignment. Most Global South nations reject the notion of a new Cold War, instead advocating for strategic autonomy and multi-alignment. Countries like Indonesia, Brazil, and South Africa engage with both China and the US without subscribing to bloc politics. They emphasize development, infrastructure, and digital sovereignty over participation in military rivalries. Rather than being passive observers, these nations are shaping the terrain of competition through economic diplomacy, resource nationalism, and civilizational narratives.

4. Synthesis: Between Geography and Ideology

The Indo-Pacific provides the geography of the New Cold War. It maps military power and maritime chokepoints. The Global South provides the politics of refusing Cold War logic. It asserts a normative claim to global justice, civilizational dialogue, and development rights. (Hurrell, 2018)

Countries like those in ASEAN find themselves navigating both terrains. While geographically embedded in the Indo-Pacific, their political orientation often aligns with the Global South. They avoid entrapment in great-power rivalries by adopting flexible hedging strategies and emphasizing regional centrality and dialogue. In this sense, the Indo-Pacific and Global South are not merely rival frameworks-they represent competing visions of world order. The future of global governance will be shaped not only by strategic competition but also by the intellectual and ethical contest between security-centric and justice-centric paradigms.

5. ASEAN–China Relations Amid Competing Geopolitical Logics

ASEAN stands at the intersection of two powerful frameworks: the Indo-Pacific and the Global South. While geographically embedded in the Indo-Pacific-framed by maritime security and great-power competition-ASEAN's political ethos aligns more closely with the Global South's emphasis on sovereignty, justice, and multipolarity. This dual positioning enables ASEAN to act not as a pawn in the New Cold War, but as a diplomatic bridge between rival blocs. China, as ASEAN's largest trading partner and a major force behind initiatives like the Belt and Road and RCEP,

represents an economic opportunity that ASEAN cannot ignore. Yet the Indo-Pacific narrative, led by the US and allied powers, frames China's rise in terms of threat and containment. ASEAN has resisted this binary logic by pursuing a policy of strategic autonomy, engaging with both China and Indo-Pacific coalitions without fully aligning with either. This balancing act reflects ASEAN's civilizational maturity and its Global South identity.

Conclusion

The Indo-Pacific and the Global South appear at first glance to be irreconcilable worlds. One is shaped by maritime strategy and hard security. The other is shaped by history, justice, and the memory of colonial struggle. Yet their coexistence does not have to produce confrontation. Their differences can become complementary if approached with humility and openness.

The Indo-Pacific sharpens awareness of geopolitical risks. The Global South elevates the moral imperative of inclusivity and development. Together, they can enrich global dialogue rather than divide it.

For China, ASEAN, and the international community, the challenge is not to choose one worldview over the other, but to build the capacity to translate between them. Peace becomes possible when each accepts that no single narrative can claim to define the world for all.

A stable future will come not from dominance or ideological victory, but from coexistence shaped through dialogue, reciprocity, and respect for civilizational diversity. Two different imaginaries can converge on a shared purpose: a multipolar world guided by wisdom, dignity, and cooperation rather than fear.

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