

Beyond Indo-Pacific: Strategic reimagination and role conception across the Pacific Rim

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The Pacific Ocean covers approximately 46 per cent of the Earth's water surface and around 32 per cent of its total surface, with about 41 countries bordering it. The sheer number of geographically dispersed countries contributes to a diverse and complex geopolitical environment. In this context, the term 'Indo-Pacific' has established itself as the dominant strategic discourse shaping regional order. This essay uses role conception theory to examine the emergence of alternative conceptualisations across the Pacific Rim, most notably the Blue Pacific and the Latin Pacific. It posits that middle and small powers utilise these narratives as deliberate acts of role articulation, with the intention of redefining their position within the hierarchically structured architecture of the Indo-Pacific. These alternative narratives do not intend to contest or replace the Indo-Pacific framework; rather, they seek to redefine it by asserting agency, relationality, and connectivity. This enables these actors to engage with the prevailing regional order in a less peripheral and more co-constitutive manner. In this sense, such narratives function as strategic discursive tools through which states negotiate their status, sense of belonging, and level of influence within an evolving regional system.

[National role conception](#) refers to a state's perception of its role in the international system. It covers the attitudes, decisions, responses, functions, and commitments a government considers appropriate when interacting with other states. These perceptions are revealed through sustained patterns of decision-making, not just a single policy choice (Holsti, 1970, p. 245). The Indo-Pacific can thus be seen as a strategic discourse. States use it to articulate and interpret their roles within the region. Australia offers a prominent example. As Hayes (2018) suggests, [Australia has shifted](#) between the Asia-Pacific and Indo-Pacific frameworks to express and recalibrate its regional outlook.

Primarily advanced by the so-called [Indo-Pacific Four](#) (Choong, 2019), comprising the United States (U.S.), Australia, Japan, and India, the Indo-Pacific concept has been the subject of extensive scholarly analysis. One prominent strand of the literature emphasises its association with great power competition. Wilkins and Kim (2022) argue that the concept functions as a [strategic narrative](#) championed by the U.S. and its closest allies, warning that it is a '...polarising concept [that] will likely contribute to further sharpening of strategic mistrust and geopolitical competition'. Similarly, Li (2020) suggests that the Indo-Pacific epitomises a new form of geopolitical and geo-economic competition driven by [U.S.–China rivalries](#), particularly in response to China's Belt and Road Initiative.

From a policy perspective, the U.S. sees the [Indo-Pacific](#) as a strategic narrative to overcome what it views as narrow understandings of 'Asia'. It aims to reinforce alliances and partnerships and shape the regional order (White House, 2022). In contrast, China uses the term 'Asia-Pacific' in official discourse (State Council, 2017), saying it better reflects regional realities and portrays Indo-Pacific narratives as tools of U.S.-led strategic competition.

Another strand of the literature focuses on transformation in regional power dynamics. For example, Green (2022) examines [Japan's evolving strategic approach](#) to the Indo-Pacific. Abbondanza (2022) highlights the role of [middle powers](#), such as Australia, South Korea and Indonesia, in shaping the Indo-Pacific as a multipolar construct. Medcalf (2020) views the development of the Indo-Pacific as a collective effort to address [shifting geopolitical realities](#) across security, economy, and diplomacy, seeking to articulate a preferable regional order, manage great power competition, and respond to the growing strategic significance of the broader maritime environment.

While much of the existing literature focuses on the contestation and adoption of the Indo-Pacific framework, alternative and locally rooted conceptualisations have also emerged, offering a discursive reframing of how the region can be understood and constituted. Pacific Island countries, situated at the geographical centre of the region, have articulated their own discourse: the [Blue Pacific](#) (Pacific Island Forum, 2022). This framework foregrounds a collective oceanic identity that transcends national borders and highlights the centrality of the maritime environment to the livelihoods, cultures, and security of Pacific societies.

The Blue Pacific should not be understood as a competing strategic narrative to the Indo-Pacific concept (Morgan, 2020), as Pacific Island countries have an acute awareness of prevailing power asymmetry. Rather, it articulates how small power states perceive their role within the region. Although, like the Indo-Pacific, the blue Pacific emphasises the connectivity of oceans, it constitutes a normative vision through which small states assert sovereignty, regional agency, and self-determination in the face of intensifying geopolitical competition. It seeks to [resist efforts by external actors](#) to dictate regional economic, security, or development agendas, and instead promote [Pacific Islands priorities](#) grounded in long-term resilience, sustainability, and people's wellbeing at the global stage (Aqorau, 2025; Morgan, 2020). In particular, the Ocean of Peace has been in development since mid-2023, spearheaded by Fijian Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka. It articulates a vision of the Pacific as a zone of peace, grounded in principles aimed at preventing conflict, avoiding escalation, and maintaining regional stability. This narrative was [formally endorsed](#) by the 2025 Pacific Island Forum annual meeting (Ocean of Peace, 2025).

By elevating these priorities, the Blue Pacific questions the conventional 'Indo-Pacific' narrative that predominantly frames the region through geostrategic terms. Rather than accepting externally defined priorities, it reimagines the Pacific as a community of shared responsibility, in which small states assert agency, shape regional agendas, and gain recognition as key stakeholders in the evolving regional order.

On the other side of the Pacific Ocean, the Latin Pacific ('Latino-Pacífico') is also an emerging concept, raised among Latin American states. The narrative portrays Latin America as an active and strategic player in the Pacific rather than a peripheral region. It emphasises the region's vital resources, such as critical minerals, food surpluses, renewable energy potential, biodiversity, and its strategic geographic location, and aims to transform these into capabilities that enable [Latin American countries to exert influence](#) in global affairs (Bórquez, 2023).

Given Latin America's relative distance from the Indo-Pacific pivot and its traditionally limited engagement with Asia and Oceania, the [concept](#) of Latin Pacific aims to reframe Latin American states playing a proactive role in the Pacific by promoting regional interests and balanced regional engagement, while also positioning the region as a reliable provider of strategic goods and a hub for intercontinental connectivity (Bórquez et al., 2025). It also addresses the limitations of fragmented regional institutions by proposing coordinated action across five areas: green energy diplomacy, Pacific food security, trans-Pacific maritime corridors, port infrastructure and the digital economy.

In response to the Indo-Pacific concept, Latin-Pacific provides a Latin American perspective that complements, rather than competes with, Asia- and India-centric Indo-Pacific frameworks. While the Indo-Pacific focuses on great-power competition, security and alliances, the Latin-Pacific concept emphasises autonomy, regional cooperation and the strategic use of Latin America's resources to engage with Pacific actors on a more balanced, multilateral basis.

Overall, the Pacific region is not solely defined by the Indo-Pacific narrative. As role theory suggests, states adopt and project different strategic narratives in their engagement with others, shaped by factors such as location, resources, capability, national values, and states. This essay argues that the cases of the Blue Pacific and the Latin Pacific illustrate how the Pacific Rim can be constituted by multiple, overlapping attempts to reimagine and engage with regional order. Indeed, the Indo-Pacific discourse is likely to remain the dominant framework for articulating security interests and regional priorities due to prevailing power dynamics; alternative regional visions should not be overlooked, as they reflect the perspectives of smaller or peripheral actors often marginalised in great-power narratives. The narratives articulate regionally grounded visions centred on sovereignty, sustainability, connectivity, and developmental agency, thereby broadening the terms of regional debate beyond strategic competition.

Whether or how these frameworks will affect interstate engagement is beyond the scope of this essay. Almost for sure, they are unlikely to supplant the Indo-Pacific discourse, nor will all states agree with their underlying conceptualisation. Yet, they reveal an emerging plurality of strategic imaginations that recognise diverse identities and interests, as well as connectivity and inclusivity across the Pacific. Ultimately, this multiplicity reflects an evolving complexity in the [multiplex world](#) (Acharya et al., 2023) in which the Pacific is co-constructed rather than imposed, and smaller actors actively participate in shaping its future.

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