Perhaps no geopolitical concept is likely to prove more important to the course of the 21st century than that of the Indo-Pacific. Not only is it the area where the growing China-US rivalry seems to playing out, it is also home to a host of large and middle powers. These countries have a stake in that Great Power contest, but they also have ambitions and growing economies of their own. Rory Medcalf explains the complexities, risks and opportunities of this multipolar future.
THE INDO-PACIFIC has assumed totemic significance for a wide range of nations affirming their agency in an uncertain world. Far from being an obscure account of words and maps, the narrative of the Indo-Pacific helps nations handle a great dilemma of the 21st century: how can other countries respond to a strong and coercive China without resorting to capitulation or conflict? At a descriptive level, the Indo-Pacific is just a neutral name for a new and expansive map centered on maritime Asia. This conveys that the Pacific and Indian oceans are connecting through trade, infrastructure and diplomacy, now that the world’s two most populous states, China and India, are rising together. Their economies, along with many others, rely on the sea lanes of the Indian Ocean to ship oil from the Middle East and Africa, and myriad other cargoes in both directions, along the world’s vital commercial artery.

But the Indo-Pacific is also about drawing strength from vast space, and from solidarity among its many and diverse nations. The term recognizes that both economic ties and strategic competition now encompass an expansive two-ocean region, due in large part to China’s ascent, and that other countries must protect their interests through new partnerships across the blurring of old geographic boundaries. The Indo-Pacific concept recognizes that multipolarity defines this emerging regional order, and offers part of the answer to its strategic challenges around managing China’s power.

NAMES, MAPS AND POWER
Some voices warn that the Indo-Pacific is code for geopolitical agendas: America’s bid to thwart China, India’s play for greatness, Japan’s plan to regain influence, Indonesia’s search for leverage, Australia’s alliance-building, and so on. Certainly, China feels risk and discomfort in the term. It hears Indo-Pacific as the rationale for a strategy to contain its power through a “quadrilateral” alliance of democracies — the US, Japan, India and Australia.

Yet, what most makes the Indo-Pacific real is China’s own behavior — its expanding economic, political and military presence in the Indian Ocean, South Asia, the South Pacific, Africa and beyond. The signature foreign policy of Chinese leader Xi Jinping is the “Belt and Road” initiative, which is part infrastructure-and-lending spree, part strategic power play and part marketing campaign. The “Belt” refers to Chinese ambitions on land. The “Road,” however, is short for “Maritime Silk Road” — which means the Indo-Pacific with Chinese characteristics.

Mental maps matter. Maps are about power. How leaders define regions can affect their allocation of resources and attention; the ranking of friends and foes; who is invited and who is overlooked at the top tables of diplomacy; what gets talked about, what gets done, and what gets forgotten. A sense of shared geography or “region-alism” can shape international co-operation and institutions, privileging some nations and diminishing others. The late 20th century notions of the Asia-Pacific and an East Asian hemisphere excluded India at the very time Asia’s second most populous country was opening up and looking east. This was not just unfair; it was untenable. The Indo-Pacific fixes that, although it is important to correct the assumption that this way of seeing the world is all about India: it is principally about recognizing and responding to China’s widening strategic horizons.

There is no one right or permanent way of framing the world — nations choose maps that help them simplify things, make sense of a complex reality and above all serve their interests at a given time. For now, a Chinese description of much of the world as simply the Belt and Road has become common parlance. For a long time, people have been accustomed to labels such as the Asia-Pacific, East Asia, South Asia and Southeast Asia, Europe, the North Atlantic, Eurasia and so on.

These are all geographic constructs — invented terms that powerful states have at some time consecrated, with a self-centered political purpose. Even Asia is not originally an Asian framework, but a term Europeans concocted and adjusted for their own reasons. Its imagined boundaries keep shifting. In 2014, China hosted a conference that called for Asians alone to determine Asia’s future, but with an interesting catch: its member states included the likes of Russia and Egypt, friends of China that are not categorically Asian, yet not Indonesia and Japan, Asian countries that could make life difficult for China in the future.

Like previous mental maps, the Indo-Pacific is in some ways artificial and contingent. But it suits the times: a 21st century of maritime connectivity and multilateral geopolitics. The term Indo-Pacific has thus become code for certain decisions of consequence. In part, it is a message to a rising China that it cannot expect others to accept its self-image as the center of the region and the world. But it is also a message to America. It is a signal that China and America are not the only two nations that count.

BEYOND FALSE BINARIES
Binary choices are a tempting simple way to make sense of some of the more mind-numbing headline statistics about the sheer size of the Chinese and American economies. In isolation, such data tell a compelling story: that China has either already overtaken America as the world’s largest economy, or soon will, and not much else matters. But it is illuminating to play with some other numbers — statistics that embed the two leading powers in a system of many substantial nations, the region we now call the Indo-Pacific. This complex reality includes many “middle players”: significant countries that are neither China nor the US. Working together, the region’s middle players can affect the balance of power, even assuming a diminished role for the US.

Consider, for instance, the possibility of a different quadrilateral: Japan, India, Indonesia and Australia. All four have serious differences with China and reasonable (and generally growing) convergences with each other when it comes to their national security. They happen to be champions of an emerging Indo-Pacific worldview. And they are hardly passive or lightweight nations. In 2018, the four had a combined population of 1.75 billion, a combined gross domestic product (or GDP, measured by purchasing power parity, or PPP, terms) of US$21 trillion and combined defense expenditures of US$147 billion. By contrast, the US has a population of 327.4 million, a GDP of US$20.49 trillion and defense spending of US$649 billion. For its part, China’s population is 1.39 billion, it has a US$25 trillion economy and its defense budget is US$250 billion. (This assumes, of course, that official Chinese statistics regarding economic growth and population size are not inflated, and there is reason for doubt.)

Project the numbers forward a generation, to mid-century, and the picture of middle players as potential balancers become starker still. In 2050, the four middle players are expected to have a combined population of 2.108 billion and a combined GDP (PPP) of US$63.97 trillion. By then, America is estimated to have 379 million people and a GDP (PPP) of US$34 trillion. China will have 1.402 billion people and a GDP of US$58.45 trillion. Even just the big three of these Indo-Pacific partners — India, Japan and Indonesia — would together eclipse China
in population and exceed it economically. By then, their combined defense budgets could also be larger than that of the mighty People’s Liberation Army. Include one or more other rising regional powers with their own China frictions, such as a Vietnam that may have about 120 million people and a top 20 global economy, and the numbers are stronger still. Even the combination of just two or three of these countries would give China pause.

South Korea is another substantial power that will make a difference to the long-term regional balance. It has long been transfixied, understandably, by security problems close to home. Yet it has profound interests and a growing role across the Indo-Pacific: an acute dependence on Indian Ocean sea-lanes, a strong ocean-going navy, and plenty of reasons to work with other middle players, reflected in expanding ties with Southeast Asia and India. Seoul has been cautious about embracing Indo-Pacific rhetoric, but interests and actions matter more.

And all this talk of middle-player solidarity, for the sake of the argument, imagines away a continued strategic role for the US. Whatever the confusions and diplomatic traumas of the Trump era, it is entirely premature to conclude that Washington has given up on the region. Indeed, the opposite may be true: it is difficult to see how America can sustain full-spectrum sovereignty. And it does this by breaking up the confusions and diplomatic traumas of the Indo-Pacific label, but for nations like Australia, Japan, India and Indonesia, the Indo-Pacific is a way to navigate turbulence in Asian power politics in which Xi Jinping’s China is disruptive, Donald Trump’s America is dysfunctional, and other countries are desperate to preserve what they can of peace, prosperity and sovereignty. And it does this by breaking through the late 20th century mental boundary that separated the Pacific and Indian oceans, ossified into the one-useful but now outmoded idea of the Asia-Pacific.

A diplomatic domino effect has taken hold, with many governments shifting toward talking and thinking Indo-Pacific. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi made it the animating theme of his keynote speech at an Asia security summit in Singapore in 2018. The 10 countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) agreed in 2019 to an Indo-Pacific outlook on their relations with an enlarged region. This confirms the Indo-Pacific is not an idea alien to Asia: indeed, it gives the middle players of ASEAN more centrality than they had in the past Asia-Pacific era, or than they would have in a world defined only by Beijing’s Belt and Road.

At a descriptive level, the Indo-Pacific is just a neutral name for a new and expansive map centered on maritime Asia ... But the Indo-Pacific is also about drawing strength from vast space, and from solidarity among its many and diverse nations.

MANY PLAYERS, MANY LAYERS
In the contemporary Indo-Pacific moment, nations are interacting in a great game with multiple participants and dimensions. China’s expanding economic, military, and diplomatic activity in the Indian Ocean marks an emerging Indo-Pacific strategic system, where the actions and interests of one powerful state in one part of the region affect the interests and actions of others. The Indo-Pacific power narrative intersects the interests of at least four major countries — China, India, Japan and the US — as well as many other players, including Australia, Indonesia and the other Southeast Asian nations, South Korea and more distant stakeholders, not least in Europe. Russia, too, is making its presence felt. The Indo-Pacific is a multipolar system, in which the fate of regional order, or disorder, will not be determined by one or even two powers — the US and China — but by the interests and agency of many. The region’s foremost strategic challenges may be China-centric, but the region itself is not.

The power contest in the region has often been likened to the Great Game between imperial Britain and Russia in the 19th century. This time, though, there are more than two players. There are also very different drivers — combinations of interests, values, identity — behind each state’s actions in the region. Beyond narrow ideas about defense and security, these involve nationalism, history, political legitimacy and of course economics, including the quest for resources and sustainability in a threatened natural environment. For China, in particular, there is a troubling...
thread between the domestic and the international. For Xi and the Communist Party to maintain their grip on total power, they have found it necessary to raise the Chinese people’s expectations that their nation will be great abroad, and will successfully handle resistance. Yet China’s expansive policies mean that its problems overseas are accumulating, and the chances of a major misstep are thus increasing. In turn, this puts Xi and the Communist Party at particular risk, because China alone among the great powers has staked much of the legitimacy of its political system on success abroad. When things go wrong, the Chinese system could suffer grievously — especially if crises of security, politics and economics intersect in ways hard to predict and impossible to manage.

Compounding the complexity of a multipolar region, a game with many players, is the reality that this is also a puzzle with many layers. Four stand out: geo-economics, military force, diplomacy and a clash of national narratives. These blend in patterns of comprehensive competition — combined with elements of co-operation — that will shape the future.

Economics, especially demand for energy, propelled the rise of the modern Indo-Pacific. China, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Southeast Asia, Australia and India all depend acutely on the Indian Ocean sea-lanes for energy and thus prosperity and security. Seaborne commerce is like the flag follows trade, and that security presence becomes a consequence of connectivity. This does not mean that all such activity began as a grand strategy or — faced with complex local politics — that it will necessarily succeed. For instance, geographically pivotal places such as Sri Lanka and Malaysia remain in play: their sustained dominance by China is not a forgone conclusion. But as with the European empires of old, it is clear that the flag follows trade, and that security shadows economics, along with risks of conflict. The Indo-Pacific has a starkly military dimension. A pivotal moment has been China’s turn to the sea. Its navy is expanding rapidly, in line with a 2015 proclamation by Xi Jinping that the “traditional mentality that land outweighs sea must be abandoned” when it comes to protecting China’s interests. A massive shipbuilding program has been underway for years. Aircraft carriers are being commissioned, not primarily to patrol China’s proximate waters or even the South China Sea, but to show force on the open ocean. The People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) showed up in the Indian Ocean with three warships to counter Somali piracy at the start of 2009, and has never left. For the first time since the voyages of Admiral Zheng He in the 1400s, China is an Indian Ocean power.

China is not alone. It has far-flung interests to protect and is hardly the only external power to fly the flag in Indian Ocean waters. The US has long operated there, including at its base on the contentious UK possession of Diego Garcia. Japan opened a base at Djibouti before China did. This century, almost every ocean-going navy, from Russia to Singapore, has sent forces to protect commerce from Somali-based pirates, a rationale for China’s mission. And the world’s navies are converging not only west of the Malacca Strait. Indian, American and Japanese warships practice together from the Bay of Bengal to the Western Pacific. As China militarizes artificial islands in the South China Sea, both commercial and military fleets from across the globe exercise their international legal rights by traversing this shared highway at the heart of the Indo-Pacific.

All this armed mistrust would seem an urgent test is on for the commanding heights of technology: artificial intelligence, quantum computing and 5G telecommunications. Contrary to turn-of-the-century dreams of globalization, economic interdependence is no longer just about breaking down borders and letting all states rise together: it has become a tool of power and influence, captured in the newly popular catch-all term, “geo-economics.”

China’s Belt and Road spree of loans and infrastructure has become a geo-economic powerplay, a strategy for pre-eminence. The “Road” is the Indo-Pacific with Chinese characteristics, a bid to extend influence into the Indian Ocean and the South Pacific. The “Belt” of overland connectivity through Eurasia is of secondary importance, given that transport of bulk goods and energy by sea will remain cheaper and arguably no riskier — albeit slower — than by land. The strategic impacts of the Belt and Road warrant close attention, including a new colonialism — accidental or deliberate — in which Chinese coercion, political influence and security presence become a consequence of connectivity. This does not mean that all such activity began as a grand strategy or — faced with complex local politics — that it will necessarily succeed. For instance, geographically pivotal places such as Sri Lanka and Malaysia remain in play: their sustained dominance by China is not a forgone conclusion. But as with the European empires of old, it is clear that the flag follows trade, and that security shadows economics, along with risks of conflict. The Indo-Pacific has a starkly military dimension. A pivotal moment has been China’s turn to the

MANAGING MISTRUST
Can some patchwork of diplomatic arrangements truly keep the peace? Will new partners stand by each other if one finds itself in confrontation with China? And how much difference can middle powers really make when vital interests are at stake?

The answer is partly about perception, for there is another level of contestation abroad — a struggle to shape perceptions, and therefore reality. The Indo-Pacific power competition includes efforts to shape attitudes and narratives among populations and decision-makers: a classic way to win without fighting. China is combining the “soft power” of persuasion with the “sharp power” of internal political interference, to neutralize opposition and reconfigure the Indo-Pacific game board, from Australia to Sri Lanka, Pakistan to the Pacific island states. The narrative battle is no longer all going China’s way. But there are risks in how the US and others respond. Too blunt a pushback can be self-defeating, as one US official discovered when
There is nothing intrinsic about the Indo-Pacific idea that it should exclude Beijing. For China is by definition a major player in such a region, and recognizing this means acknowledging, for instance, its right to play a security role in the Indian Ocean.

She likened competition with China to a “clash of civilizations” in disturbingly cultural, even racial, terms. The reality is a clash of political systems, where Washington needs to maintain diverse friends, not alienate them.

China and the US have entered a state of comprehensive struggle, amounting to full-spectrum rivalry. The situation could deteriorate further, through miscalculation or coercion. There have long been four well-known flashpoints in East Asia: Taiwan, the South China Sea, the East China Sea and the Korean Peninsula. But beyond these, there are now signs that conflict is increasingly conceivable in the wider Indo-Pacific. The US is only one of China’s potential adversaries: China-India and China-Japan relations will remain fraught and fragile. The flashpoints may not even be geographic, but could involve interventions in the information realm, such as cyber intrusions or disputes over freedom of expression. A conflict that begins in East Asia could escalate across the region, for instance, through distant naval blockades, cyberattacks and economic sabotage.

What can be done? Coexistence is the most reasonable expectation, and is an essential starting point for any loftier ambitions of co-operation. But it may take an international near-death experience – the 21st century Indo-Pacific equivalent of the Cuban missile crisis – to compel governments to get serious about the risk-reduction measures needed to keep the peace. Such a crisis could spook nations into making proper use of the existing but under-appreciated “architecture” of rules and communications channels. Scope also remains for today’s Indo-Pacific governments to get much more serious about leveraging co-operation against common threats – such as climate change, natural disasters, resource depletion, transnational crime, piracy and terrorism. This could improve co-ordination and transparency in managing mistrust.

In this multipolar age, nations will not succeed in securing their interests if they pursue strategies in isolation. This includes the strongest powers, the US and China. The region is too vast and complex for any country to protect its interests alone. There will be a premium on partnerships. An understanding of the special nature of the Indo-Pacific region – including its scale and diversity – helps identify the elements of a strategy for navigating what will likely be decades of friction. These include a calibrated mix of diplomacy, development and deterrence, including contingency planning.

There is a need for sustained activism and solidarity among middle players such as Australia, India, Japan, South Korea and their partners in Southeast Asia and Europe, to show the way for an American strategy that is competitive but not confrontational, confident but not complacent. In dealing with Chinese power, old notions of “accommodation” and “containment” need to be discarded in favor of “incorporation” or “conditional engagement.” This would be about involving China as a legitimate great power based on mutual adjustment and respect. There is nothing intrinsic about the Indo-Pacific idea that it should exclude Beijing. For China is by definition a major player in such a region, and recognizing this means acknowledging, for instance, its right to play a security role in the Indian Ocean.

It is true that the Indo-Pacific idea dilutes and absorbs Chinese influence. That is part of the point. This is not about shutting China out of its own extended region, but rather incorporating it in one that is large and multipolar. Others need to adjust to China and China needs to adjust to them, especially Asia’s large middle players. Of course, China has a major and rightful place, a status that is respected and prominent – just not dominant. A “sphere of influence” approach, in which China is allowed to control East Asia while India in turn is allowed to dominate the Indian Ocean, will simply not work: China’s seaborne oil dependence, and the security, economic and diaspora footprint of its Belt and Road, make it too late for that. At the same time, given China’s great strategic weight and temptations toward hegemony, the Indo-Pacific idea is empowering for other countries, encouraging them to build new and defensive partnerships across outdated geographic boundaries.

But such moderation of Chinese power will likely fail if middle powers do not seek solidarity but instead are cowed by the observation that there is little each can do to influence China on its own. Much will depend on how nations choose to use the current window of pan-regional awareness. Strategic solidarity and alliances have traditionally applied only to armed conflict. But what if Indo-Pacific principles such as respect for rules and sovereignty began to translate into new forms of collective and non-military resistance to maritime bullying or economic coercion? Or if new region-wide standards for infrastructure were to limit the misuse of such investments for hostile purposes? Whatever happens, nations need to build their resilience and harness all elements of their power for a long phase of contestation.

A course can be charted between naivety and fatalism. There is no guarantee this will work. Still, the very nature of the Indo-Pacific – its connected vastness, its multipolarity as a game with many players – is part of the answer. This
is a region too big and diverse for hegemony. It is made for multipolarity and creative new partnerships across collapsed boundaries. Its distances and riches and scattered strategic territories may tempt imperial overstretch — but correct it too.

A CHANCE FOR SOLIDARITY

The very speed with which Indo-Pacific thinking has arisen fuels doubts about its impact and staying power. After all, the countries that champion the term do not seem to agree precisely on what it means. The US and Japan talk about “free and open,” with Indonesia and India emphasizing inclusiveness and connectivity, and Australia somewhere in between. This may be a sign of deeper differences over just how to respond to Chinese power and US-China tensions. For Americans, the Indo-Pacific is a signal that they are not leaving Asia and — even in spite of Trump — still have many friends there. For others, it is a reminder that this region includes many nations — representing billions of people — who are neither Chinese nor American, and that their views matter too.

Yet there is an underlying solidarity. All countries advocating the Indo-Pacific are using it to signpost what they want: economic connectivity that does not translate interdependence into one country’s exploitation; rules and respect for sovereignty; the avoidance of force or coercion in resolving international differences.

The Indo-Pacific is both an objective description of geopolitical circumstances and the basis for a strategy. That is but one of its useful dualities. It is both inclusive and exclusive: it is about incorporating Chinese interests into a regional order where the rights of others are respected; but it is also about counterbalancing Chinese power when those rights are not.

The Indo-Pacific’s boundaries are fluid — it is, after all, a maritime place — and this helps explain why various countries define it differently (and why that is no great problem). But the region’s core is clear: the sea lanes of maritime Southeast Asia. As for the periphery, it is defined by connections, not borders. This is consonant with the ancient Asian concept of the mandala, originating from Hindu cosmology, which with many variations defined the universe according to circles and a central point. In the mandala model, as opposed to the “middle kingdom” worldview of China, centrality does not bestow superiority. Rather, the model recognizes a world of many places, many islands. In modern parlance, this equates to multipolarity, equal sovereignty and mutual respect — many belts and many roads.

Professor Rory Medcalf is Head of the National Security College at the Australian National University. He is a former diplomat and intelligence analyst, and founding director of the international security program at the Lowy Institute. He was an early advocate and developer of an Indo-Pacific concept of the Asian strategic environment. This article previews his book, Contest for the Indo-Pacific: Why China Won’t Map the Future, LaTrobe University Press in conjunction with Black Inc, Melbourne, to be published in March 2020.