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The Indo-Pacific as strategic imagination

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Professor Brendan Sargeant left a profound legacy for all of us who make, implement and analyse Australian strategic policy. The fullness of his gift to the nation ranges across an exceptional commitment to leadership, analysis and mentorship, from the Department of Defence to the wider policy community and the academy. He is not the only senior official to have made a mark beyond the bureaucracy. One element, however, that distinguishes the work of Brendan Sargeant was his embrace of the act of imagination as integral to strategy. This was accompanied by a disarming openness about the place of imagination in policymaking. Professor Sargeant's pioneering official work on the concept of the Indo-Pacific as a two-ocean regional framework for Australian strategy, articulated in the *2013 Defence White Paper*, merits examination and proper prominence.

To describe the Indo-Pacific as an artefact of strategic imagination is not to reject this construct as meaningless or 'not real'; quite the opposite. The single strategic arc of connectivity and contestation Brendan identified a decade ago is now the orthodox understanding among many countries, even (however tacitly) China. Looking ahead, Australia's great challenge, as Brendan argued in his later scholarly work, is how to learn to live in the Indo-Pacific. Accordingly, Australian policy thinkers and practitioners have the opportunity and obligation to build on his vision in developing a statecraft to suit this inclusive strategic environment. This account brings together a sense of Brendan's exceptional personal qualities, his championing

of the idea of strategic imagination, a case for the validity of the concept of the Indo-Pacific and his place in foregrounding that in Australian policy. It concludes with a reminder of the unfinished business of shaping and implementing an Indo-Pacific strategy.

Strategic guru

Brendan's passing in February 2022 was a loss not only in the most personal sense to family and friends, but also to Australia's community of scholars, strategists and policymakers. He is rightly remembered for his intellect, integrity and commitment to public service, combined with personal kindness and decency, undergirded by a striking absence of ego—taken together, a set of qualities rare in the worlds of policy and academia alike. Professor Sargeant was widely respected as a leader and thinker across strategy and policy. His long career in the Australian Public Service culminated in leadership roles in the Department of Defence, as associate secretary and deputy secretary. His subsequent stewardship of the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre (SDSC) at The Australian National University remained, sadly, a work in progress at the time of his passing. His role as head of SDSC continued a fine tradition of practitioner-academic leaders combining seasoned policy judgement with scholarly rigour, but his mission to navigate this national institution to suit the challenges and opportunities of the 2020s remained incomplete.

However, one can imagine Professor Sargeant being quietly philosophical about his unfinished business, for there was something of the mystic about Brendan. He was a guru in the full Sanskrit sense: a leader, but also a guide and mentor, who saw it as his calling not didactically to show new generations the path, but to encourage them to find it for themselves. The visitor to Brendan's office—whether on the executive floor of the Defence Department on Canberra's Russell Hill or later in the Hedley Bull Building at The Australian National University—could not help but notice his collection of idols of Ganesha, the beloved elephant deity, remover of obstacles and god of beginnings, knowledge and success.

This was not just a reflection of his Indian family by marriage. Brendan's world view was informed by, among other wisdoms, elements of Hinduism: an appreciation of ambiguity and duality and an ethos of duty and acceptance. There is only so much we can do to change the world; it remains a demanding enough task to learn how to live with and leverage

what is, including for a strategist, our geographic reality. Not that Australia's geography needs necessarily be a source solely of difficulty or anxiety. On the contrary, Australian policy should recognise and embrace the opportunities of being in a part of the world so connected with Asia, including a healthy respect for the cultures and perspectives of this region or, as Brendan would put it, learning to live in the Indo-Pacific.

Power and poetry: Awakening strategic imagination

One of Brendan Sargeant's most powerful intellectual contributions was his 2021 SDSC Centre of Gravity Series Paper, *Challenges to the Australian Strategic Imagination*, with an associated public lecture. Here is explicitly set out his conception of how imagination could usefully inform policy, with reference to the Indo-Pacific as a vision for Australia's strategic environment:

How are we to live in the Indo-Pacific in the 21st-century? This is not first a question of policy or strategy. It is a challenge to strategic imagination. Not only do we need to imagine ourselves into what we might be, but also what the world might be. Is our vision of our future large enough to accommodate and respond to the scale of change that we are seeing?¹

We will return to Brendan's 2021 manifesto presently, but first it is worth recognising that his identification of imagination as a foundation for policy was not some radical remaking of his outlook with the benefit of liberation from the exigencies of the bureaucratic life. Rather, he was carrying forward an idea he had first articulated as early as 2006 in a foray into the academic and public sphere while a serving Defence official. Brendan's essay 'Burning Bright: Defence Policy, Strategy and the Imagination', courageously put forward the idea that threat perception—and consequent deployment decisions—was informed by nothing less than 'the imagination of the nation, of the people and of the Department of Defence'.²

1 Brendan Sargeant, *Challenges to the Australian Strategic Imagination*, Centre of Gravity Series Paper 58 (Canberra: Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, The Australian National University, 2021), hdl.handle.net/1885/233085.

2 Brendan Sargeant, 'Burning Bright: Defence Policy, Strategy and the Imagination', *Australian Army Journal* 3, no. 3 (2006): 67–86, at 67, researchcentre.army.gov.au/sites/default/files/aaj_2006_3.pdf.

Only Brendan Sargeant, perhaps, could have accused an impersonal Defence bureaucracy of possessing such a thing as an imagination. Only Brendan Sargeant, without a doubt, could have enlisted William Blake's 1794 masterpiece of transcendental poetry 'The Tyger' as a cipher to explain the relationship between imagination and strategy. Kudos to the *Australian Army Journal* and Catherine McGregor for releasing this discipline-defying essay into the intellectual wild, where, along with the Centre of Gravity Series Paper, it should be essential reading for future generations of security practitioners and academics alike.

The 2006 and 2021 publications repay examination side by side, to show both continuity and evolution. Both legitimised imagination as integral to strategy, the identification of possibility, creating meaning, opportunity and life from imperfect materials, turning visions into 'something real' or, in the words of Lawrence Freedman, 'the ability to get more out of any given situation than the starting conditions would suggest are possible'.³ The 2006 paper, written in the aftermath of the disastrous invasion of Iraq, was also focused partly on the perils of imagination: '[W]e are in the most danger when we allow our imagination to separate from those realities in the world that establish limits.'⁴ The 2021 paper, in contrast, concentrated on the need for more creative and expansive thinking to prepare Australia for the problems of the Indo-Pacific—a two-ocean region of many powers lacking mature institutions and in the midst of instability and power contestation. Both analyses emphasised the relevance of geography in defining realistic Australian strategic objectives. The paradox of the Indo-Pacific is that Australia cannot escape the vastness of this connected strategic environment, even while our limited ability to shape regionwide outcomes encourages an emphasis on the near neighbourhood of the South Pacific and South-East Asia.

Mapping the Indo-Pacific

In barely a decade, the concept of the Indo-Pacific has travelled from relative obscurity to become a new orthodoxy in the statecraft of many nations and institutions around the world. Not only has Indo-Pacific rhetoric and thinking permeated Australian defence, foreign, geo-economic

3 Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), xii.

4 Sargeant, 'Burning Bright', 83.

and development policy across the political spectrum but, since the mid-2010s, a growing number of governments and international organisations have recast their Asia-centric engagement through explicitly Indo-Pacific strategies or, at the very least, formal statements by their leaders. Notable on the list are Japan, the United States, India, Indonesia, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, the Republic of Korea, Canada, Taiwan, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the European Union, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the G7 and even, with unsurprising Pacific-centric caveats, New Zealand.

The Indo-Pacific situates Australia in a larger strategic system than the Asia-Pacific of the late twentieth century, or even more bounded regional conceptions such as Oceania or the East Asian Hemisphere championed in the mid-1990s by then foreign minister Gareth Evans. Its advocates see it as a practical reimagining of the world map to suit the problems of our time. The concept reframes an Asia-centric region to reflect growing connectivity and contest across two oceans, providing somewhat equal billing to the Indian and the Pacific oceans, driven in substantial part by China's (but also India's) expanding interests and influence across this maritime space. This vision is useful to many nations because it explains and encourages the balancing and dilution of Chinese power through an array of new partnerships across collapsed geographic boundaries. We thus have a metaphor for collective action—code for a pivotal region where China can be prominent but not dominant. In a global discourse often dominated by Beijing's transgressions and triumphalism, or simplistic narratives of US–China bipolarity, the Indo-Pacific idea offers a useful alternative.⁵

In explaining what the Indo-Pacific is (and is not), there is merit in addressing several of the standard criticisms of the concept: that it is all about containing China, that not all Indo-Pacific policy positions align and that ultimately it is an artifice.

Much of the controversy regarding the Indo-Pacific is based on the perception that this is effectively a code for the containment—or exclusion—of China. Such portrayals make superficial sense if they are limited to interpreting the earliest 'free and open' variants of Indo-Pacific strategy as promoted in 2016 by then Japanese prime minister Abe Shinzo or in 2017 by then US president Donald Trump, but even those versions, especially Japan's, left the door

5 This section draws on the author's previous work, in Rory Medcalf, *Contest for the Indo-Pacific: Why China Won't Map the Future* (Melbourne: La Trobe University Press, 2022), ix–x.

open to engagement with China.⁶ More broadly, there are multiple versions of Indo-Pacific policy, most with a focus on connectivity and inclusion. The Indo-Pacific is about offering the choice of incorporating a powerful China into a regional order where the rights of others are respected and actively counterbalancing that power when those rights are not. After all, it has been the growth of China's wealth, power, interests and influence across two oceans—which Beijing calls the Maritime Silk Road—that has been a large impetus for this Indo-Pacific era. The Indo-Pacific idea has a maritime fluidity and a philosophically Asian duality; it is about incorporating the interests of the many, while marshalling the capabilities of the willing.

Another line of criticism is that different nations profess different Indo-Pacific visions and that this is an intrinsic weakness; in other words, the Indo-Pacific is a hollow concept precisely because its advocates do not entirely agree on balancing or containing China. This disregards the degree of convergence and mutual acceptance among many national and institutional visions. For example, the 2019 Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) outlook focuses on connectivity and development and lists more than 14 principles, including, unsurprisingly, ASEAN centrality, as well as openness, inclusivity, rules, mutual respect and renunciation of the threat or use of force.⁷ The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) of Australia, India, Japan and the United States has often been presumed an Indo-Pacific initiative to balance and exclude China, yet its communiqués resemble the ASEAN list, underscoring a convergence of Indo-Pacific visions. Essentially, all such perspectives articulate that this is a region defined by: connectivity and contestation across two oceans; a status as the emerging global centre of gravity economically, demographically and strategically; a multipolar and maritime character; and a core place for South-East Asia, both geographically and through ASEAN institutions.

Perhaps the strangest objection to the Indo-Pacific idea is that it is precisely that—a work of the mind. In the words of a Chinese diplomat, 'there is no such concept as an Indo-Pacific in geopolitics'—as though, absurdly, the full menu of possible geopolitical frameworks has been carved in stone since the

6 For a sophisticated discussion of Japan's free and open Indo-Pacific strategy and how it was influenced by Australian policy and, in turn, influenced American policy, see Michael J. Green, *Line of Advantage: Japan's Grand Strategy in the Era of Abe Shinzō* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), especially pp. 105–61, doi.org/10.7312/gree20466.

7 Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), *ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific* (Jakarta: ASEAN Secretariat, 2019), asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/ASEAN-Outlook-on-the-Indo-Pacific_FINAL_22062019.pdf.

dawn of time, leaving no flexibility or agency as the world changes.⁸ In the case of Chinese policy, this opposition to the Indo-Pacific on the basis of its being an artificial construct derives overwhelmingly from the concern that it mitigates against China's interests as a way to accentuate India's role in the wider region and undercut the supposed centrality of China. In parallel, there has been a wariness in parts of the academy—conservative in its own way—to engage with this different mental map. After all, why supplant the Asia-Pacific, which had the virtue of being 'established'? Of course, this begs the question: established when, how and by whom? All regional definitions are to a least some degree artificial, although it must be said that the material facts reflected in the Indo-Pacific—of economic connectivity and civilisational interaction across the two oceans—have a pedigree of millennia. There was a time when the Asia-Pacific itself was novel (and incidentally resisted by China because it privileged the United States)—a useful framework for the second half of the twentieth century, to reflect the new and impermanent reality of relations between East Asia and North America mattering more than relations across Asia. The Asia-Pacific, the Indo-Pacific and Chinese leader Xi Jinping's imposed view that somehow a region makes best sense as a 'Belt and Road' centred on Beijing—all are mental maps that states consecrate or defy with political purpose. That is the point. They are acts of strategic imagination.

Brendan the navigator

However much its content and utility are contested, the prominence of the Indo-Pacific idea is clear. What is less well known is the vital role played by Brendan Sargeant in influencing Australia's Indo-Pacific outlook and, by extension, the impact of Australian diplomacy in encouraging the framework's wider adoption.

In the early 2010s, the Labor government under prime minister Julia Gillard was open to an active reimagining of Australia's regional environment. In the aftermath of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, there was a growing awareness of fundamental shifts in economic weight occurring, particularly through the growth of the Chinese economy, with new patterns of trade, but also through the rise of other Asian economies. In terms of security risk, the Australian defence establishment was also awakening to the prospect of rapid Chinese military and especially naval modernisation—though not yet to the level

8 Ananth Krishnan, 'U.S. Created Indo-Pacific Concept to Bring in India to Contain China, Says Chinese Official', *The Hindu*, [Chennai, India], 15 December 2022.

of strategic competition that would manifest later in the decade. The *2009 Defence White Paper* under prime minister Kevin Rudd anticipated a need for Australia to expand its naval power and suggested that the north-east Indian Ocean would be of rising importance to Australian security as part of a 'wider Asia-Pacific region'—a foreshadowing of the Indo-Pacific.⁹

Subsequently, distinct new narratives of Australia's region were framed in two key documents: in late 2012, an 'Asian Century' white paper, accentuating economic opportunity; and a Defence White Paper in early 2013 that sustained the ambition of greater Australian maritime power while, in an unpromising fiscal context, was necessarily cautious on the spending commitments to get there. Both documents introduced a seemingly novel way of defining Australia's region of interest: not the Asia-Pacific (a received wisdom from at least the 1980s) but something called the Indo-Pacific. This received experimental treatment in the Asian Century document, before becoming a signature theme throughout the Defence White Paper. This was in large part thanks to a certain Defence deputy secretary for strategy, Brendan Sargeant. Government documents are inevitably the product of process, politics and many institutional inputs. Nonetheless, in this one, Brendan's authorial voice was clear and spoke to history:

[A] new Indo-Pacific strategic arc is beginning to emerge, connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans through Southeast Asia ... India is emerging as an important strategic, diplomatic and economic actor ... Growing trade, investment and energy flows across the broader region are strengthening economic and security interdependencies ... Although the strategic environment will be shaped largely by the relationship between the United States and China, and by the rise of India in the longer term, the increasing number of influential Asian states means we are witnessing the evolution of a more complex and competitive order.¹⁰

So many of the ingredients of subsequent Indo-Pacific analyses and policies were presented: an emphasis on the sea lines of communication; a warning about strategic risk, maritime disputes and flashpoints; and a premium placed on partnerships and mini-lateral 'smaller or ad hoc groupings' in a mega-region where a middle power would increasingly struggle to project its voice and protect its interests.

9 As noted by Melissa Conley Tyler and Samantha Shearman, 'Australia's New Region: The Indo-Pacific', *East Asia Forum*, 21 May 2013.

10 Department of Defence, *Defence White Paper 2013* (Canberra: Australian Government, 2013), 7–8, www.defence.gov.au/about/strategic-planning/defence-white-paper.

The case for the Indo-Pacific was captured in maps that Brendan specially commissioned. An unclassified map portrayed the density of civilian shipping—containers, energy and resources—across the Indo-Pacific arc, graphically presenting the rising significance of the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, alongside the more established traffic across the Pacific between East Asia and North America. It did not suggest a central place for Australia, but rather an inescapable position of proximity, especially to the regional core (and chokepoints) of maritime South-East Asia. It also reinforced the acute dependence of Australia's and other major regional economies on those sea lanes, with deep implications for national security and stability. According to Brendan, this first official Indo-Pacific map was initially controversial in parts of the Australian policy community and reportedly was met with some bewilderment among US officials still focused on the Middle East.¹¹

It is worth emphasising that, although some American officials had already begun toying with Indo-Pacific terminology, the concept remained contested within the US system and would for some years yet. This is a reminder that the Indo-Pacific was not an artefact of US policy imposed on a reluctant Asia, but had authentic regional progenitors, including in India, Indonesia and Japan.

Within Australia, Brendan was one of several influential policy practitioners and voices, along with Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) secretary Peter Varghese, defence minister Stephen Smith, ambassador to the United States Kim Beazley, director-general of the Office of National Assessments Allan Gyngell and, outside government, this author. My own interest in developing the Indo-Pacific concept began when I was an intelligence analyst from 2003 to 2007, building on my previous three years' diplomatic experience in New Delhi, where I had focused on the potential for India as a strategic partner. I found myself observing changing patterns of economic connectivity, military capability and diplomatic coalition-building, including the establishment of the East Asia Summit and the abortive 2007 Quad meeting. Subsequently, a career change in joining the Lowy Institute provided a platform for patiently advancing an Indo-Pacific world view in the public debate. A significant moment was an invitation to give the inaugural SDSC Centre of Gravity lecture on this

11 As recounted by Brendan Sargeant to the author, in Medcalf, *Contest for the Indo-Pacific*, 282.

topic in 2012—the kernel of many later articles and eventually a book.¹² All along, there were frequent trusted exchanges of insights with colleagues inside policy who were thinking along similar tracks. Among them, Brendan Sargeant—through his intellectual agency and his act of imagination—was decisive in getting the concept over the line as formal policy in the *2013 Defence White Paper*, which was the first official document of any government to call the Indo-Pacific a region of strategic interest. His vision and his map therefore became iconic in the unfolding history of Indo-Pacific policy and have informed much subsequent policy cartography.

Horizon, limits and the challenge ahead

Brendan Sargeant was never comfortable with strategic or policy orthodoxy; he was a champion of contestability and debate. Just as he advanced the Indo-Pacific as an act of strategic imagination, so, too, he would have been among the first to ensure that the policy conversation should not stand still. Likewise, he would have remained focused on the practicalities as well as the vision, for implementing Indo-Pacific policy requires constant awareness of the limits of Australian resources and the need to leverage partnerships. His own writings imply the tensions within the rapidly arrived Indo-Pacific orthodoxy. The Indo-Pacific idea he cultivated in the *2013 Defence White Paper* was not some crude contrivance to contain Chinese power, nor was it a call for Australia to overextend its capabilities across a region too large for any single power to manage. He recognised the duality in the fact that the Indo-Pacific encompasses some features of a strategic system—notably, the reliance of China and other East Asian states on the Indian Ocean—even while each subregion would maintain distinct concerns and the security architecture was not a ‘unitary whole’. Professor Sargeant called for Australia to learn to live in the Indo-Pacific, while being realistic about the limits geography places on our ambitions. This is not a contradiction but a duality. Managing this constant tension is a principal task for Australian statecraft and will require all dimensions of national engagement, including societal, economic and diplomatic as well as military. As Brendan said, all this begins as a challenge to imagination, and this is where the quality of imagination is vital. He leaves us all with work to be done.

12 Rory Medcalf, *Pivoting the Map: Australia's Indo-Pacific System*, Centre of Gravity Series Paper 1 (Canberra: Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, The Australian National University, 2012), hdl.handle.net/1885/228705.

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