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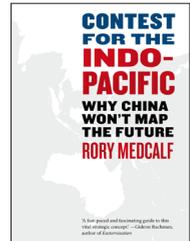
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Review: Contest for the Indo-Pacific: Why China Won't Map the Future by Rory Medcalf

Reviewed by Jeffrey Wilson



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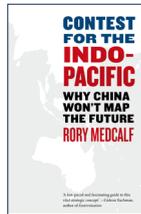
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Contest for the Indo-Pacific: Why China won't map the future

Rory Medcalf

La Trobe University Press in conjunction with Black Inc. (March 2020)

Reviewed by Jeffrey Wilson



At no point since the end of the Second World War has Australia's regional environment been in such a state of upheaval. Great power conflict, the gradual failure of international institutions, trade warfare and now the COVID-19 pandemic—all epicentred in Australia's region—are posing formidable challenges for foreign and defence policymakers. Professor Medcalf's *Contest for the Indo-Pacific* therefore comes at a time when an understanding of the history, architecture and fracture-points of the Indo-Pacific is sorely needed. But while *Contest* promises and delivers an excellent account of the Indo-Pacific story, it is insights on the prospects for mid-

dle power diplomacy in the region for which it should be recognised.

The Indo-Pacific is still sufficiently novel that any book review on the topic needs to begin with terminological ground-clearing. The Indo-Pacific is a new concept to describe the region of the world roughly centred on Asia. It builds on the prior 'Asia-Pacific' concept developed in the 1980s, geographically extending the region westwards to include the Indian Ocean littoral. Proponents of the Indo-Pacific concept argue that the scope of economic and security interdependencies today spans both the Indian and Pacific oceans, warranting this 'Asia to Indo-Pacific' frame shift in foreign policy thinking. The Indo-Pacific terminology for the region has now been formally adopted by four governments (Australia, Japan, India and the US), has entered into de facto use by most others in the region (including ASEAN), and is only explicitly opposed by the People's Republic of China (PRC).

As Professor Medcalf has been one of the most vocal public advocates for the Indo-Pacific concept for around a decade, it should come as no surprise that his first book on the topic has been widely anticipated. Indeed, it does not disappoint. *Contest* provides a detailed telling of the Indo-Pacific's history, a sophisticated analysis of the strategic conflicts that are emerging and concludes with a vision of the future that puts the re-

gion at the centre of world affairs. Written accessibly for a popular and international audience, it lacks the detail to offer a 'definitive history' of the Indo-Pacific, but its clarity and engaging narrative make it an excellent general treatment.

Readers wanting a specialist analysis of particular domains of regional politics—such as maritime security or the institutional architecture—should still look to the academic and think tank literatures. But for those wanting to connect the individual threads of the Indo-Pacific concept into a cohesive and comprehensive narrative, *Contest* is perhaps the best book yet written.

One of Professor Medcalf's most important contributions is to resolve a longstanding confusion regarding the definitional status of the Indo-Pacific. Many debates over the Indo-Pacific are afflicted by authors arguing at cross-purposes: some view the concept as a 'theatre', some as a 'strategy', others as a commitment to a certain set of ideological beliefs (such as democracy), others as an assemblage of institutions. This lack of definitional clarity has led analysts down a garden path of arguing over whether the Indo-Pacific 'really exists', employing competing definitions to make their case.

Contest clearly—and this reviewer hopes, will decisively—settles this vexing mess. It makes clear that the Indo-Pacific is a geographic concept

for understanding the spatial scale of interdependencies in the region. For example, as oil shipments traverse a maritime corridor from the Gulf of Oman to the Sea of Japan, the Indo-Pacific is simply a mental device to understand the scale of that spatial interconnection. The PRC's official rejection of the term Indo-Pacific does nothing to undermine the analytical utility of recognising that geographic reality. Nor do perceived deficiencies of the US Indo-Pacific Strategy condemn the concept to some kind of premature death. Nor does India's absence from some regional institutions mean the Indo-Pacific has not yet taken form. Actually, existing regional interdependencies demonstrate that the Indo-Pacific is now the region's 'map'. How governments choose to respond to that map is then a matter for politics.

Much of *Contest* is thus dedicated to making an argument about what the politics of this new map looks like, and how it will evolve. Its principal thesis is clearly telegraphed in the title's second clause: '*Why China won't map the future*'. Responding to a widely held belief that US regional hegemony is in structural decline while the PRC's leadership claims are inexorably rising, Professor Medcalf carefully stakes out the contrarians' claim. Through chapters examining great power conflict, multipolarity, maritime issues and PRC foreign policy ambitions, *Contest* argues that while regional order is becoming less

stable, it is by no means shifting from US to PRC hegemony. Examples abound where the strength of the US presence is illustrated, the extent of PRC overreach is explored, and the inherently multipolar nature of the new regional map is demonstrated. This is an important and timely corrective, as it helps move beyond the simplistic 'Thucydides' Trap' debate that should rightly be relegated to first-year international politics tutorials.

To be sure, not all readers will be convinced by *Contest's* core thesis. Professor Medcalf's view of the US regional presence does allow space for the corrosive effects of the Trump Presidency, but many will view it as underdone given the damage inflicted to the US's important regional alliances. Analysts will debate forever the supposed 'inexorability' of the PRC's rise to global power; and those who have not yet been convinced by the sceptical accounts of Susan Shirk and Minxin Pei won't find anything new in *Contest* that fundamentally changes their mind. Observers of Japanese, Indian and ASEAN foreign policy might also accuse Professor Medcalf of over-optimism regarding these countries' capability for international leadership, given their poor track records in recent decades. But the dissenters will at least have to respond. By showing that the Indo-Pacific map is inherently a multipolar map, *Contest* will help move the debate from a narrow 'US versus China'

discussion to one that properly puts the entire region into discussions of regional order.

If *Contest* was simply an account of the Indo-Pacific region, glossed through a PRC-sceptical lens, it would certainly justify its place in the market. However, the book's contribution goes beyond the two elements telegraphed in the title. Bundled within its analysis of Indo-Pacific multipolarity is a second thesis regarding middle power diplomacy and its role in region-building. By arguing that the Indo-Pacific map is a multipolar one, Professor Medcalf also directs attention to how middle powers —those large enough to influence the regional order, albeit not large enough to attempt to dictate it —have played an indispensable role in shaping the contemporary regional order. While many are considered, four middle powers (Australia, India, Japan and Indonesia) receive consistent attention, and are shown to be the real engine behind the Indo-Pacific shift.

The importance of Professor Medcalf's middle power thesis is revealed on the very first page. His narrative begins on Remembrance Day 2016, during Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's second state visit to Prime Minister Abe Shinzo of Japan. The visit was catalytic for the Indo-Pacific because it marked the first formal connection of Japan's 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' strategy with India's 'Act East' counterpart. This was the first

time the Indo-Pacific had shifted from a *linguistic device* used individually by governments to describe the region, to a *strategic concept* that would form the basis for international partnership. Abe was the leading norm entrepreneur behind the Indo-Pacific concept (first using it in 2007), while India's adoption was essential in anchoring the westward extension of the regional map. That it was Japan and India that transitioned the Indo-Pacific from a geographic concept to a strategic device demonstrates how middle powers built this new region.

Indeed, such middle power activism was a highly risky strategy. In 2016, Australia was the only other country that had formally adopted the Indo-Pacific terminology (in 2013), and it would be another year before the US would officially do the same. Moreover, the PRC was mounting a strong diplomatic campaign against the terminology—arguing that it was inherently designed as a 'China-containment device'—making most ASEAN members reticent to engage with the idea, at least in public. But by working together, the Australia, Japan and India trilateral was able to see the US, New Zealand, Singapore, Indonesia and ASEAN eventually adopt the concept as well. The PRC now finds itself as the only major 'Indo-Pacific denier' in the region.

Sceptics of middle power diplomacy take note: Middle powers can achieve significant things, both in the absence

of a push from security guarantors (the US), and in open defiance of economic powerhouses (the PRC).

If this reviewer were to find fault, it would be the relative lack of attention paid to Australia's role. Consistent Australian diplomacy was essential in bringing the US into the Indo-Pacific fold, and it was an important contributor with ASEAN, Singapore and Indonesia as well. Australia's adoption of the term in 2013 also sent a message to the region that countries economically dependent on the PRC could still 'get away with the Indo-Pacific'. As Professor Medcalf is an Australian, this is somewhat surprising: all analysts have a tendency to accord their own country an outsized importance in world affairs. It may reflect a light form of self-censorship, borne of a (commendable) desire to internationalise the book for a broader regional audience. If Australia's relative omission achieves this goal, and *Contest* gets read in capitals across the region, it will be a warranted compromise. But Australian readers should be ready for several 'but what about us?' moments.

In the long run, the lasting influence of Professor Medcalf's book will likely be due to its middle power thesis. There have been (and will continue to be) good books on the Indo-Pacific; and the market for PRC-scepticism is now as saturated as that for PRC-boosterism. By those yardsticks, *Contest* is a fine and read-worthy book which

traverses fairly well-trodden territory. But if the reader pays close attention, they will see that Professor Medcalf's lasting contribution has been to demonstrate how the Indo-Pacific is not just a theatre for some US-PRC 'great game' but actually a complex and multipolar domain. And that its future—for better or worse—will be significantly written by the middle powers. *Contest* might well have been subtitled '*Why middle powers will map the future*'.