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The Murky Origins of the Term “Free and Open Indo-Pacific,” one of Former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s Legacies

The German Karl Haushofer (1869-1946) was a general in World War I, a geographer, and one of the main proponents of “geopolitics.” In the 1920s, he introduced the marine-biological term *Indo-Pacific* into the political discourse. Abandoned for half a century, this neologism has lately been resurrected, and it is booming. In May, US-President Joe Biden launched an initiative to create an *Indo-Pacific Economic Framework* (IPEF).

From 1908 to 1910, Haushofer, then a major of the Royal Bavarian General Staff, visited Japan primarily to observe its military. Three years earlier, Nippon had won its war against Czarist Russia, the first victory of a non-European nation against a major European power in centuries. During his stay in Japan, he also traveled to Manchuria and Korea, then a Japanese colony. In 1913 Haushofer published *Dai Nihon* (Greater Japan), a book based on this trip. It would eventually help establish him as one of Nazi Germany’s leading expert on East Asia.

Haushofer was close friends with Rudolf Hess, a former student of his at the University of Munich. Hess had joined the Nazi-Party already in 1920. He was Party Member number 16 and a devoted follower of Adolf Hitler. After the Fuhrer came to power in 1933, Hess was appointed “Deputy Fuhrer.”

International historians see Haushofer as one of Hitler’s teachers. *Mein Kampf* takes up his concept of “Lebensraum” (living space). The notion that a nation’s political life is affected by its geography is hardly a discovery. Hitler expanded Haushofer’s idea of “Lebensraum” into the German quest for more space in Eastern Europe. More “Lebensraum” for the Germans nation become a central motive of Hitler’s foreign policy. In 1940, the *New York Times* noted that Haushofer’s “influence of geopolitical doctrines is clearly discernible in Adolf Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*.” Some German historians disagree,

they play down Haushofer's importance for Hitler's war. Despite his prominence in Nazi-Germany, they insist, Haushofer himself was no Nazi. Indeed, he was not a member of the party. As a friend of Rudolf Hess, he was part of the Nazi's inner circle without a membership card, but he attended four party congresses. With Hess' secret flight to England on May 10, 1941, Haushofer's personal involvement with the top echelons of the Nazi Party came to an abrupt end.

Hitler's teacher or not, the Fuhrer had read Haushofer's *Dai Nihon*, a book that celebrated Japan's militarism. Haushofer portrayed the Eastern nation as having been hardened "by the bath of steel of its wars." In his eyes, Japan proved "its right to exist" with its victories against China (1895) and Russia (1904/05). Haushofer called war the "biggest test for an emerging nation."

Dai Nihon is as much the depiction of Japan it claims to be, as it is Mr. Haushofer's projection of his ideals of a militaristic, feudal, but modern society. He paints Japan as the land of warriors happy to die for their nation or their Emperor, and a society in which men committed suicide to restore their honor. His knowledge of Japan was superficial. The book discusses allegedly typical characteristics of "the Japanese race," and draws similarities with the Germans. Haushofer even claimed to have found traits identical to the two nations, only to lament that his fellow Germans lost some of their feudal virtues. They lacked the clear and concise terms for honor and duty of the Japanese, he noted.

Haushofer's most influential book was titled *Geopolitik des Pazifischen Ozeans* (Geopolitics of the Pacific Ocean). From 1924 to 1944, he edited and published *Zeitschrift für Geopolitik* (Journal for Geopolitics).

This is not the place to discuss Mr. Haushofer's complicated personality, his self-aggrandizing expertise on Asia, or his belief that he could predict the future with geopolitics. At the time, he and his theories were well-known and widely discussed in Europe, the US and in Japan.

Karl Haushofer is largely forgotten, except among historians. However, *Indo-Pacific*, the term he coined, has never been used as widely before. Heads of state, ministers,

diplomats, including many from Germany, and journalists discuss the *Indo-Pacific* as a concept for a future order of East Asia, or even beyond. Are these people aware of the fact that they use a term coined and propagated by Nazi-Germany? Do they use it out of ignorance, or in spite its Nazi-origins, especially the politicians and diplomats from Germany?

Studying the interrelations between history and geography, as he said, Haushofer developed a model of growing economic, cultural and military blocks. He believed the world would eventually be divided into three “pan-regions,” or huge political-economic blocks: The first one would be Europe and Western Asia, including Russia, dominated by Nazi-Germany; the second the Americas under the leadership of the US. The third block, East, South and Southeast Asia, would be “the rightful preserve of Imperial Japan”: “the Indo-pacific space.”

The core of Haushofer’s *Indo-Pacific* consisted of Japan with its colonies, China’s costal areas, and parts of South-East Asia. He identified under- and over-populated regions, among the latter Japan and costal China, and saw them in need of more space. He thus projected Germany’s quest for “Lebensraum” onto East Asia.

What *Indo-Pacific* exactly stood or stands for has never been established. Which countries or regions would be part of it, especially at the margins? In Haushofer’s view, Imperial Japan was destined to become the leading power of his Eastern pan-region. Modern, disciplined, and militarized, it was the only country capable to lead Asia. He considered semi-colonized China as being in decline, while India, Malay, Indo-China and today’s Indonesia were European colonies. Imagining an East-Asia dominated by Tokyo, he implicitly supported a decolonization of Asia -- or rather its re-colonization by Japan. This had the welcome side-effect that it would have weakened Germany’s European adversaries.

The late nineteenth century saw the emergence of *Pan-Asianism*, a diversity of multifaceted intellectual and ideological movements against Western colonialism. Haushofer took this as evidence that his theories were correct. In the years before Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor, he and his writings became popular in Japan.

In August 1940, Yosuke Matsuoka, then Japan's foreign minister, launched his own version of an Asia led by Tokyo: "The Greater East-Asian Co-Prosperity Zone." However, just like Haushofer, he never specified what his grand expression really stood for. Jeremy Yellen, a history professor in Hong Kong and the author of a 2019-monograph on "The Greater East-Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere," sees Matsuoka's concept as "a moving target," a vague, abstract idea. He quotes Japan's war-time Prime Minister Hideki Tojo who in February 1942 asked in a government liaison meeting what the term stood for, and what the difference between that concept and a defense pact was, but did not get a clear answer.

Germany's defeat and Japan's capitulation silenced all talk of a Berlin- or Tokyo-led political block. The term "Indo-Pacific" disappeared from the political discourse. Among English-language scholars, it became a taboo word until Henry Kissinger reintroduced it.

The Cold War divided the planet into two blocks. Washington controlled the Pacific Ocean, and most other seas. In 2004, more than a decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union, British historian Paul Kennedy mocked the US with their hundreds of thousands of American troops deployed to "the Eurasian rimlands." They seemed to follow the English geographer Halford Mackinder, one of Haushofer's inspirations, Kennedy noted.

For half a century, nobody spoke of a political-economic or strategic merger of the Indian and the Pacific Ocean -- until the summer of 2007. On August 22, 2007, then Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, assassinated last week, addressed the Indian parliament with a speech titled "Confluence of the Two Seas." He propagated an "Arc of Freedom and Prosperity" from Japan to India, possibly including South-East Asia. He thus echoed Matsuoka's "Sphere of Co-Prosperity in Greater Asia." Soon after his overture to India, however, Abe had to step down. After his return to power in 2012, he replaced the phrase "Arc of Freedom and Prosperity" with "Free and Open Indo-Pacific." Abe, admittedly nostalgic of 1930s Japan, must have been aware that his proposed "Arc" echoed Matsuoka's wartime slogan; and that Indo-Pacific was a Nazi-German phrase. Did he try to imply continuity?

Just like Matsuoka and Haushofer, Abe did never specify what his “Arc” or the “Indo-Pacific” exactly stand for.

Wartime Japan considered itself encircled by ABCD (America, Britain, China and the Dutch), the nations that refused to sell oil, iron ore or steel to Japan. Abe’s main intention for a “free and open Indo-Pacific” was to contain rising China. However, virtually at the same time, Chinese President Xi Jinping began to promise his own version of a “common prosperity” in Asia.

History repeats itself as a farce. China is Japan’s most important trading partner by far, and a crucial production site for many Japanese companies. Without China, Japan has no chance for prosperity. Its trade volume with India, on the other hand, is marginal.

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine may have strengthened some international blocks, i.e. NATO and the EU. The *Indo-Pacific*, however, failed this first test. Japan sanctions Russia, India refuses to.

ASEAN, ASEAN+3, ASEAN+6, APEC, CPTPP (originally TPP), RCEP, the Shanghai Cooperation, the Belt and Road Initiative, there are already a great number of multinational organizations in East Asia. Some overlap, others compete, some work better than they seem (ASEAN for example), others are little more than talking shops. Does Asia really need the IPEF, yet another initiative for “co-prosperity”? During the Obama administration, Washington pushed for the creation of the TPP, but then jumped ship? Now it is trying to create a new trading block that would be overlapping the TPP to a large extent.

Does Asia really need another attempt at building a political, economical and military block? And if so, must its name imply continuity with the past, Nazi-Germany and fascist Japan?

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