

# Thoughts from Seoul

## From Jeju Forum

Pondering the Indo-Pacific on Korea's Island of Peace

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Jeju Forum is among my favorite international affairs conferences and one that I've been lucky to attend a dozen times since 2010. The reason I love it has a lot to do with the island itself. There is something about the seas and winds and stones of Jeju that brings peace of mind. Being surrounded by rugged natural beauty, along with sorrowful island history (look up “Jeju 4.3 Incident”), reminds busy conference go-ers in their suits and slacks—certainly reminds me—of why peace matters, of what peace physically looks like.

The keynote session of this year's Jeju Forum brought together five of the six candidates for United Nations Secretary General, a rare chance to see them side by side and hear their thoughts on the future of international organizations. Young people studying on the island were given a chance to ask questions from the floor, and the intergenerational dimension was a highlight of the program. Battle-scarred Ban Ki-moon presided, smiling and diplomatic yet by his own admission “angry” at the unraveling of internationalism. I walked out of the

session thinking how badly the world needs a UN leader who is able to exert both bureaucratic and charismatic authority, strengthening the organization internally while, on the public stage, giving voice to the embattled cause of international cooperation. I hope whoever wins is up to the challenge.

The panel I moderated this year asked the question, “How to Reconcile the Indo-Pacific and Asia Pacific?” of a quartet of experts based in the US, China, Australia and Europe. As moderator, my job was easy—to elicit the collective wisdom of a group including my old friend Dan Smith, who has been doing brilliant work on conflict resolution and arms control as director of SIPRI for the last decade; my new mate Martin Walker, a seasoned Australian diplomat; and two colleagues whom I respect immensely in the wild wonderful world of US-China relations: Tsinghua professor and CICIR veteran Da Wei, and NCAFP director/ Yale Law senior fellow/ State Department survivor Susan Thornton. Panelists were encouraged to delve into the underlying questions of peace and security across the region, whatever they wished to call it, rather than dwell on the semantics of Indo-Pacific and Asia-Pacific per se. It was a rich conversation (I wish there were a YouTube video!).

Here for the Substack, I wanted to add a thought or two on the language itself. And that’s because this question of “Indo-Pacific versus Asia-Pacific” gained unexpected salience just last week, when the US “Department of War” abruptly announced that one of its global commands, headquartered in Hawai’i, would revert to its original 1947 name of Pacific Command, canceling the *Indo-Pacific Command*.

This erasure was a bit of head-scratcher, since it was the Trump administration that added INDO to INDOPACOM, with considerable fanfare, back in 2018. That renaming ceremony was high-level discursive legitimization of a comparatively new strategic concept, originally floated by Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe in a 2007 address to the Indian Parliament and formally adopted first by Australia in its 2013 Defense White Paper. And the rechristening was hardly an isolated incident. Renaming the command was part of a massive US push to get allies and partners to adopt the nomenclature of

Indo-Pacific as a shibboleth for siding with the US in the intensifying “great power competition” against China.

In the dying days of Trump 1.0, the administration declassified the ‘U.S. Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific’ for all the world to see, and mimic. The Biden administration embraced the idea wholeheartedly, creating the new position of Indo-Pacific Coordinator on the National Security Council for Kurt Campbell, who was fondly known as the Indo-Pacific Tsar. With steady urging from Washington, one by one ‘likeminded’ nations put out their own Indo-Pacific outlooks, visions or, as the Swedes called theirs, ‘defense policy direction’ papers.

There were awkward moments in this worldwide campaign, like when the launch of the “EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific” in September 2021 was marred by the announcement, that very same day, of Canberra’s cancellation of a French submarine contract as part of the new AUKUS grouping, royally pissing off Paris.

Seoul was a bit of a foot-dragger, never terribly enthusiastic about the whole Indo-Pacific thing. South Korea does not identify strongly as a Pacific power, certainly not an Indo-Pacific one, and the fact that a revisionist, right-wing Japanese leader coined the phrase did not help it much. Koreans were also not gung-ho about the campaign behind the term—they would prefer that the US and China figure out how to get along, and do *not* want to have to choose between the two. Nonetheless Seoul fell in line by producing a Strategy for a Free, Peaceful and Prosperous Indo-Pacific in December 2022.

I got a glimpse of how the Indo-Pacific idea made its way as far as Rome when, in the fall of 2023, Italian Parliament invited me to give expert testimony to its newly formed *Comitato permanente sulla politica estera per l’indo-pacifico*. The tone in Rome was decidedly less ‘anti-China’ than Washington, which was enjoying a bipartisan consensus around passing *Let’s beat China!* legislation. But still, the subtext of the Italian subcommittee at the outset was anxiety over China’s rise and desire to align with Washington.

Fast-forward to the spring of 2025, when *il Comitato* invited me back for the launch event of their Indo-Pacific findings... and the conversation was no longer about China. Now, the Deputati, representing political parties right to left, were talking about the United States, and worrying about the unreliability of Washington's commitment to its own Indo-Pacific strategy.

This March I mused about whether the Iran War would mark the end of the Pivot to Asia and acceleration of Washington's retreat from the Indo-Pacific. Last week, the Department of War literally took the Indo out of the Indo-Pacific Command. It is hard not to read the name change as an expression of strategic retrenchment.

But staring at the volcanic rocks of Jeju Island as the wind whipped the sea, I could not resist a further thought. Good riddance to INDOPACOM. The world I want my children and grandchildren to inherit is one of peace agreements, arms reductions, defense cuts, and shrinking commands—indeed, a world without global combatant commands at all. There's a heretical thought for a security conference.

Of course, there is a good way to get there, and then there is a chaotic and violent one. You tell me which path we are on.