

Remarks on the Indo-Pacific - Ben King, Deputy Secretary for Americas and Asia

mfat.govt.nz/en/media-and-resources/ministry-statements-and-speeches/remarks-on-indo-pacific-ben-king/



This speech was delivered at the MFAT@75 Conference in Wellington on 18 October, 2018.

As a starting point, it's useful to reflect on my fellow panellist Malcolm McKinnon's remarks about the evolution of New Zealand's relationships with Asia; the shifting focus of New Zealand interests; and the evolution of regional nomenclature over the years.

In a private discussion with Professor Robert Ayson earlier this year, he made an important assertion – that policy drives nomenclature. I believe that to be true – and I would also add that nomenclature is often defined by one's perspective – indeed, from where one stands.

Malcolm McKinnon's remarks underline the insightfulness of Professor Ayson's assertion. Indeed, in 1943, the nomenclature for this region was set from Europe - hence the references to Asia as "the Far East".

We can see that borne out in the way that our own descriptors of Asia have developed, with Malcolm McKinnon talking about the Near North; and then the development of the term "Asia-Pacific".

Malcolm McKinnon also pointed out that even that term – the Asia-Pacific – has evolved from what we understood it to encompass at the birth of the APEC process in 1989, and what we understand it to mean, now.

Which leads to me reflect on one of the issues currently being vigorously discussed in the region: The growing number of countries which now describe this region as "the Indo-Pacific".

As is often the case, the term "Indo-Pacific" means different things to different actors.

At the most simple level, we can think of the Indo-Pacific as a geographic descriptor: that is, the product of a conscious decision to shift the boundaries of how we talk about this region, and who is included amongst those we consider to have interests and influence here.

In that context, while (as Malcolm McKinnon suggested) the term Indo-Pacific may not resonate in New Zealand yet, talking about an Indo-Pacific – as a geographic indicator, and as a regional construct - has some logic.

India is an active participant in ASEAN processes, most notably through its membership of the East Asia Summit. And we know that the geo-strategic competition that we see playing out in Southeast Asia has strong echoes in some parts of the Indian Ocean.

However, the Indo-Pacific also has a strategic edge. For example, Japan has promulgated a Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy (a “FOIPs”); President Trump also talked about a US FOIPs; and at the Shangri-La Dialogue earlier this year, Indian PM Modi also defined the Indo-Pacific as standing for:

[I quote] “...a free, open, inclusive region, which embraces us all in a common pursuit of progress and prosperity. It includes all nations in this geography as also others beyond who have a stake in it.” [end quote]

For New Zealand, the evolution of the regional rules-based order, and the development of new architecture, including the various Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategies, presents both risks and opportunities.

New Zealand has a clear set of principles through which we can assess new initiatives such as the Free and Open Indo-Pacific, the Belt and Road Initiative, or the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.

These principles should sit at the heart of initiatives we support, and include:

- Openness and inclusivity;
- Transparency;
- Freedom of navigation and overflight;
- Adherence to international law, including the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea;
- Respect for sovereignty;
- Open markets; and
- ASEAN centrality.

And in that context, although New Zealand does not border the Indian Ocean as Australia does, we do have interests in the Indo-Pacific. We understand, and we’re quite comfortable with, the concept of an Indo-Pacific, and how New Zealand interests are positioned within that.

In conclusion, I will just say that New Zealand’s present – and our future – is inextricably linked to the future stability and prosperity of the Pacific, Asia, and the broader Asia-Pacific and what others define as the Indo-Pacific region.

This is where our interests are most acute, and that's why generations of officers of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, with support from successive governments, have invested so significantly in the region.

It's a pleasure to have been able to reflect on inputs from such a distinguished panel.

Thank you ladies and gentlemen.

[Tropical storm Michael in southeast US](#)

[New Zealand and Canada: Trade partners](#)