

The Hen or the Hog?

Chile in the Indo-Pacific*

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Writing about the Indo-Pacific from a Global South perspective presents a significant challenge, particularly for Chilean scholars who seek to understand their country's role as a stakeholder in the region. To shed light on this challenge, an analogy related to breakfast can be helpful, albeit with potential loss of meaning in translation.

Breakfast, known as the most important meal of the day since a breakthrough discovery in the 1920s, features food combinations that are inseparable in our imagination, such as peanut butter and jelly, biscuits and gravy, or pancakes and syrup. Among American families, the preferred morning combination often consists of eggs and bacon, which research has shown to provide notable health benefits, including enhanced focus and performance for school children. The preparation of this dish requires interaction with both the hen and the hog.

In this context, the hen represents involvement, where it contributes eggs by dedicating time, effort, and some resources to the breakfast preparation. However, the hog symbolizes commitment, as it sacrifices itself to provide the meat for the meal. In the context of great-power competition, all countries actively seek to participate in the benefits offered (referred to as breakfast) by the dynamics of the Indo-Pacific by applying this analogy. When evaluating Chile's position in the Indo-Pacific, it becomes crucial to determine whether Chile is merely involved, like the hen, or genuinely committed, embodying the role of the hog.

By exploring this metaphorical framework, we can better understand the need to discern Chile's level of involvement or commitment in the Indo-Pacific. It prompts us to question whether Chile's role in the region aligns with the hen's limited contribution or the hog's full sacrifice. Chile must assess the answer to this question on its own by looking beyond narrative, evaluating its actions in the international scenario, and envisioning possibilities for the future.

Historical Perspectives on Ocean Spaces and Power Dynamics

The Indo-Pacific region has witnessed significant transformations since the beginning of the twenty-first century. It is no longer solely defined by its geographic

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position regarding the Pacific Ocean, but rather by its ability to exert influence across the vast area spanning between Bab el-Mandeb and the Panama Canal. This shift in focus presents a challenge when attempting to comprehend the current dynamics surrounding the Pacific Ocean from a Global South perspective.

Throughout history, the consolidation and transformation of power among states have played a pivotal role in international political change. As Robert Gilpin noted, “the most important factor for the process of international political change is the differential or uneven growth of power among states.”¹ Ocean spaces have consistently featured in the foreign policies of nations, as evidenced by the historical accounts of conflicts. Thucydides’ analysis of “The Peloponnesian War” reveals that decisive actions were often conducted at sea,² and similar notions were supported by figures like Plutarch and Xenophon, who described the consolidation of Spartan hegemonic power through maritime vision.³

Considering this historical backdrop, the question arises: What new insights can be gleaned in the international relations scenario of the twenty-first century? One possible starting point is the pivotal visit of President Nixon to China in 1972, which marked the reintegration of the People’s Republic of China into the international system.⁴ This event triggered the continued and sustained growth of China and catalyzed an unexpected leap forward for a group of Asian countries, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), reshaping the axis of international relations from a transatlantic to a transpacific logic. Consequently, a whole new branch of international relations perspective for the twenty-first century emerged.⁵ In today’s world, globalization, international trade, and technology, among other factors, have refocused attention on sea lines of communication (SLOC) as the foundation of prosperity, with the Pacific Ocean emerging as the primary contested space. Great powers actively and informally concentrate on the Pacific Ocean, expanding competition into the Indian Ocean, which raises concerns for coastal states about the future trajectory.

The sum of phenomena currently unfolding in maritime spaces lacks a specific designation, despite scholars’ extensive efforts to explain it. The lack of consensus on the subject is evident, with the area of interest being referred to by various names depending on the individual and their background. Whether it is termed the Pacific Rim, Asia-Pacific, Indo-Pacific, Indo-Pacific Asia, Indo-West Pacific, or numerous other designations, the understanding of this evolving phenomenon remains a subject of ongoing debate and exploration. Despite Chile’s long-standing tradition of using the term *Pacific* to describe its engagement, the complexity of the current scenario necessitates moving beyond a mere geographic description of the area of interest.

Geography delineates explicit borders that determine the names, countries, continents, and places, establishing them as homogeneous areas of study. The divisions are often based on physical features that aided civilizations in territorial division, considering climate and social factors.⁶ Similarly, the division of oceans incorporates physical land points such as Cape Horn, Malacca, Panama, Sunda, and the Oman Strait, which shaped the Indian and Pacific Ocean regions. To facilitate data gathering and conservation efforts, marine experts have classified maritime spaces into 12 marine ecoregions, defined by homogeneous sea conditions like bathy-thermography profile, salinity, fish endemism, and distribution of marine life.⁷

When examining the Indo-Pacific, marine biologists exclude the American continent as a unit of study or a stakeholder in the region. However, regarding the multidisciplinary and simultaneous phenomena occurring in transpacific maritime spaces, different concepts have emerged based on the particular interests of the involved actors. Critical geopolitics, a divergent branch of geopolitics, introduced the notion of spaces and power from a constructivist epistemology in the late 1970s.⁸ Fifty years before, the Weimar Republic of Germany strategically employed the integration of the Asian shores of the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean, combining oceanography, ethnography, and philology as a means for Germany to enhance its national power and challenge the geopolitical position of the British Empire in the area.⁹ This construct was aimed at fostering political consciousness to resist British, American, and Western European colonies by envisioning India's independence and China's transition to a republic.¹⁰

In the interwar period, Japan embraced the concept of the Indo-Pacific to pursue its vision of *Lebensraum*, which ultimately led to their invasions in the Philippines, China, and Southeast Asia. In 1998, France made a strategic move by fostering closer ties with India based on their shared interest in the Indo-Pacific region. France considers itself part of the Indo-Pacific due to its history with overseas territories, the permanent deployment of over 8,000 soldiers, active naval diplomacy, and one of the largest economic exclusive zones in the world, attributed to the French Polynesian Islands.¹¹

The term *Indo-Pacific* was adopted by Australia in 2005 and later by Japan in 2007, undergoing a shift from an economic to a security construct.¹² India was the first country to institutionalize the term in a paper published by the Institute of Defense Studies and Analyses in early 2007, in collaboration with the state-sponsored Japanese think tank, the Japan Institute of International Affairs (JIIA).¹³ The United States also joined the discussion when Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made a notable declaration in the media. In an article published in *Foreign Policy* magazine in 2011, Clinton argued that, just as the United States

had invested in the transatlantic bond in the twentieth century, it was now crucial for America to engage in the transpacific network, emphasizing the interconnectedness of the United States' future with that of the Asia-Pacific region.¹⁴

Australia further emphasized the importance of the Indo-Pacific in its 2013 White Paper, expanding upon the concept in the 2016 version of the publication.¹⁵ Since then, the term has been widely employed by journalists, academic researchers, politicians, economists, and the military to comprehend and explain various phenomena occurring in these maritime spaces. More than 40 countries have formulated individual Indo-Pacific strategies, each tailored to their own interests. These strategies vary greatly, with some countries characterizing the Indo-Pacific as “stable and prosperous” (Australia), “inclusive” (India), “focused on local presence” (France), or “connected and competitive” (Germany). In contrast, the United States and its allies emphasize the concept of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), while China dismisses any foreign conceptions as mere “wave foam.”¹⁶

Since its declaration of independence in 1818, Chile has sought to establish itself as a dominant naval power in the South Pacific. This pursuit has shaped its unique understanding of oceanic spaces, driven in part by the absence of maritime neighbors.¹⁷ This ideology, deeply ingrained in Chilean society, transcended political parties and was embraced by the nation's founding fathers, naval officers, politicians, and intellectuals, as evidenced by their consistent reference to the Pacific Ocean.

Throughout the twentieth century, Chile experienced both successes and setbacks in solidifying its tricontinental position. This position encompassed a continuous presence within a triangular area defined by Chile's northern border in South America, the South Pole in Antarctica, and Easter Island, along with the surrounding maritime areas in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

However, following an unfavorable ruling by the International Court of Justice in 2014, Chilean politicians recognized the need for a strategic shift. Merely maintaining a presence in the maritime spaces of interest was no longer sufficient. The key now lay in the ability to project state power deep into the Pacific and Indian Oceans. Thus, at least in the realm of narrative, Chile began contemplating an Indo-Pacific concept as a means to adapt to this new reality.

The Indo-Pacific is not merely a biological, geographic, or spatial concept; it emerges from a critical geopolitical approach and reflects a constructed terminology aligned with specific political ideas. From an ontological standpoint, the very name used to denote this space is already influenced by geopolitical and social agendas. Although one might assume that the Indo-Pacific encompasses the Pacific Ocean, the Indian Ocean, and the countries surrounding this region,

different countries interpret and employ the term in varying ways. Each actor utilizes a flexible concept to define the geographical scope and extent of the terminology, leading to discrepancies between countries and even within a single country's definition over time or when engaging with different actors. Given this construct, where does the Pacific Coast of the Americas fit in?

Chile's Growing Engagement in the Indo-Pacific Region

Chile, located in South America, has been actively increasing its presence in the Indo-Pacific region in recent years. Like many countries worldwide, Chile recognizes the strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific and has taken steps to engage with the region. Chile's position in the Indo-Pacific is influenced by various factors, including its geographic location, economic interests, and political relationships with other countries in the region.

Chile's geographical location provides it with a significant advantage in terms of trade and commerce, offering convenient access to the Asia-Pacific region.¹⁸ The country has actively participated in regional economic integration efforts, such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which has evolved into the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) ratified by the Chilean Congress in 2022. This agreement involves countries like Japan, Australia, and New Zealand, granting Chile access to a vast market in the Asia-Pacific region. Additionally, Chile has signed free trade agreements with several countries in the region, including China, South Korea, and Japan, further strengthening its economic ties with the Indo-Pacific.¹⁹

Chile has taken discreet steps to lead South America in opening trade routes with the Asia-Pacific region, with the Pacific Alliance being a significant initiative that unites Mexico, Colombia, Peru, and Chile in engaging with the area.²⁰ The Alliance, whose primary objective is to present a united front for engaging with major economies of the Pacific Rim, has experienced slow progress due to internal instability within Latin American countries in recent years. This includes events such as the popular demonstrations in Chile in 2019 and the democratic crisis in Peru in 2022.

Since 1980, Chile has consistently made political and diplomatic efforts to be involved in the Pacific Rim. The country has engaged in continuous dialogues with Pacific nations, leading to the establishment of the Chilean Foundation of the Pacific and gradual participation in regional diplomatic and economic mechanisms, such as the Pacific Basin Economic Council and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC).²¹

However, APEC, as the main discussion forum, faces challenges from both within and outside. Its hollow dialogues agenda jeopardizes its effectiveness, and the difficulty of reaching consensus undermines its function. Moreover, growing initiatives led by Asia-Pacific powers outside the council's scope further undermine APEC's relevance.

Chile has actively pursued a holistic vision of the Pacific, extending beyond business and geopolitics to prioritize environmental preservation, marine life, and the promotion of multilateral cooperation. The country hosted significant events such as the Our Ocean Conference (2015), APEC Summit (2019), COP-26 (2019), and United Nations National Adaptation Plan Conference (2023). With the leadership of its military, Chile is actively working towards a development model that incorporates the significance of the Pacific Ocean. Publications such as the 2017 White Book of Defense, the 2018 Chilean Oceanic Policy, the 2020 Defense Policy, and the 2023 National Oceanic Program highlight Chile's dedication to surpassing traditional models.

However, Chile is not a participant in the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), a multilateral organization that brings together 14 major countries of the region. The IPEF focuses on four key pillars: free trade, security of supply chains, clean economy, and fair economy.

As the only South American country with a truly tricontinental geographic situation, with Easter Island as its most westward position in Polynesia, Chile faces several challenges and issues in the maritime spaces of the Pacific. These include the exploitation of sea lines of communications (SLOC) by organized crime for illegal activities such as piracy, drug trafficking, and money laundering. Chile also grapples with pollution concerns in fluid spaces and the problem of illegal, unregulated, and undeclared fishing activities (IUUF), particularly concerning highly migratory fish stocks under the New York Agreement. Furthermore, Chile is committed to the nuclear weapons-free zone established by the Pelindaba Treaty. These challenges highlight the complexities Chile must address.

Additionally, there is potential for bilateral dialogues with other countries in areas such as geothermal energy with the Philippines or increased engagement with the Pacific Islands, offering avenues for further exploration and cooperation.

Approximately 60 percent of Chilean export goods are shipped to the Asia-Pacific region, with 90 percent of these exports transported by sea.²² Chile's position in the Indo-Pacific is influenced by its political relationships with other countries in the region. Chile maintains strong diplomatic ties with Australia, New Zealand, and Japan, which have been further strengthened through high-level visits, diplomatic exchanges, and participation in regional organizations like the APEC forum.²³

In recent years, Chile has actively increased its military engagement in the Indo-Pacific region. This includes participating in joint military exercises with the United States, Japan, Australia, and South Korea. Additionally, the Chilean Navy has deployed its vessels as part of multinational task forces in the South China Sea. Chile has developed a medium-sized Navy with blue-water capabilities and possesses the strongest air force in Latin America. The country maintains NATO-standard training and equipment, ensuring readiness to tackle multinational challenges if the need arises. These military considerations demonstrate Chile's recognition of the strategic significance of the Indo-Pacific region and its determination to assume a more active role in regional security.²⁴

Despite its growing presence in the Indo-Pacific, Chile faces several challenges in the region. One of the biggest challenges is the competition between major powers such as the United States, China, and India, which has led to tensions and instability. Chile aims to maintain a neutral stance in this competition and carefully balance its relationships with these major powers to avoid being caught in the middle of a geopolitical conflict.²⁵

Like many Latin American countries, Chile has a strong economic partnership with China, while also holding a strategic position aligned with the United States. In 2022, Chile's exports to China increased by 5.3 percent, outpacing the overall export growth of 3 percent²⁶. China's share of Chilean exports has grown from 24.8 percent in 2013 to 39.4 percent in 2022, with total sales to China amounting to USD 38.447 million. The United States is Chile's second-largest economic partner with sales totaling USD 13.587 million, representing one-third of China's market.²⁷ In terms of imports, China accounts for 30.9 percent of total imports, while 17.8 percent come from the United States..²⁸ Despite the economic dependency, Chile maintains a strategic position aligned with the United States, rooted in a commitment to democratic values, economic integration, open markets, and increased cooperation in areas such as technology, energy, education, fifth-generation communications, as well as addressing global challenges in security and development.²⁹

Another challenge that Chile must face is the lack of infrastructure and connectivity between South America and the Indo-Pacific. This limitation hinders Chile's ability to fully leverage its geographical position and expand economic ties with the region.³⁰ It is also a key element for Chile to achieve its long-desired geopolitical position as a logistics hub for South America.³¹ Chile also faces competition from projects developed by its competitors, such as the joint project between China and Peru to construct a mega port facility in Chancay, as well as the desire to build a Nicaraguan alternative to the Panama Canal.³² However, Chile has been actively addressing this challenge through initiatives like the

Bi-Oceanic Train. This initiative focuses on improving connectivity between Latin America and the Asia-Pacific region by leveraging Chilean ports and developing transportation and logistics infrastructure.³³ If Chile aims to develop as a logistics hub for the South American economy, it must establish a long-lasting public-private partnership (PPP). This partnership is crucial given the pressing timelines for energy and infrastructure development, which are essential to maintain a competitive advantage over rivals.

Chile also faces challenges regarding India. The US government has broadened the scope of strategic competition to encompass the entire Indo-Pacific region. Until 2020, Chile's strategy had primarily focused on the Asia-Pacific, but the pandemic and India's "vaccine diplomacy" have revealed India as an appealing partner for Chilean interests.³⁴ Trade between the two countries experienced sustained growth since 2020, with a 5-percent increase between 2015 and 2019.³⁵ According to Chile, "India has become increasingly important for Chilean trade, as it has emerged as a major player in the global economy, exhibiting dynamic growth and institutional stability, and ranking as the third-largest economic power in Asia and the fifth-largest in the world."³⁶ India, with its unaligned foreign policy toward China and the U.S., is emerging as a new force in an already shifting global landscape.³⁷ For Chile, it adds another variable to an already contested scenario, particularly when trying to navigate a neutral stance amid intense great-power competition.

Even though Chile has expressed its willingness to engage with the Indo-Pacific, its political strategy appears to face limitations in penetrating beyond the Malacca Strait. Whether at a bilateral level or within multilateral institutions, Chile's presence in the Indian Basin has remained inconsequential, rendering it an insignificant actor in the region. Even the expansion of the 2006 Free Trade Agreement with India in 2017 failed to facilitate a deeper cultural, security, or political influence, hindering the achievement of a more favorable strategic position in the evolving world order.

The current scenario, with Chile's major economic partner embroiled in a cold dispute with its primary strategic partner, falls far from ideal. The involvement of India as a rapidly growing country, along with middle powers like Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and the Republic of Korea, adds complexity to Chile's engagement in the Indo-Pacific. Amid great-power competition, Chile must navigate the Pacific waters wisely to mitigate risks. However, it is important to note that when the stakes are high, the rewards can also be significant.

Given the circumstances, it becomes evident that actions, rather than mere words, must be taken to safeguard Chile's interests in the Pacific. This entails effectively engaging with world powers and securing a favorable position that

ensures the best possible outcome for the Chilean people, enabling them to reap the benefits of a globalized world.

Conclusion

In summary, Chile's geographical location, economic interests, and political relationships with other countries shape its position in the Indo-Pacific. While Chile has made significant progress in expanding its presence in the region, it still faces challenges, including geopolitical tensions and a lack of connectivity. However, Chile's increasing engagement in the Indo-Pacific demonstrates its recognition of the region's strategic importance and its desire to play an active role in shaping its future. In the 21st century, the ability to project political action into maritime spaces, particularly in the Indo-Pacific, holds the key to geopolitical development. Chile has a crucial task ahead: defining the role it wants to assume in the Pacific Century. Unlike other aspiring regional powers such as Brazil and Argentina, Chile is well-positioned to go beyond being a mere spectator.³⁸

Many challenges in the twenty-first century have their roots in maritime spaces that extend beyond the scope of sovereignty defined by UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Chile must decide whether to lead the response to address these issues or let others take the initiative. Will Chile assume the benefits, costs, and responsibilities of being a middle power in the Asia-Pacific? With the rise of powers in an inherently unstable region, there are roles to be played by the United States, China, India, as well as middle power states, NGOs, multilateral organizations, informal actors, multinational companies, and private entities. Chile's active participation and a deeper understanding of long-term political agreements are required to be considered a relevant actor and seize the opportunities of the Pacific Century. As the story at the beginning illustrates, Chile has the choice to be either the Hen or the Hog, to be merely involved or truly engaged in the Indo-Pacific concept. Failing to decide could result in a missed opportunity for development and well-being for its people. □

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