

# Unconventional Indo-Pacific Actors: Emerging Patterns of Regional Engagement

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Gabriele Abbondanza<sup>1,2,3</sup>  Gorana Grgić<sup>4,5,6</sup> ,  
and Luigi Martino<sup>7,8</sup>

## Abstract

The Indo-Pacific is swiftly becoming the world's geopolitical and geoeconomic epicentre. While the scholarly literature has focused on the regional interactions of traditional and emerging powers, very little attention has been devoted to “Unconventional Indo-Pacific Actors,” whether institutionally atypical, geographically peripheral, or functionally distinct. To address this noticeable gap in the scholarship, this article introduces the first Forum on this topic. It first contextualises the Indo-Pacific's significance, prior to outlining the Forum's notion of unconventionality and its theoretical and analytical frameworks. The latter comprises: (i) trade; (ii) political-normative interests; (iii) security interests; (iv) external pressures; and (v) regional posture and trends. Next, it presents its case studies: Ethiopia, NATO, South Africa, and Turkey. Lastly, it highlights the goals, means, and limitations in their Indo-Pacific engagement. Consequently, both this article and the Forum contribute to the IR literature by casting light on this topical and underexplored development.

## Keywords

actorness, Asia-Pacific, Indo-Pacific, norms, security, trade

<sup>1</sup>Comillas Pontifical University, Madrid, Spain

<sup>2</sup>Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), Rome, Italy

<sup>3</sup>NATO Defense College Foundation, Rome, Italy

<sup>4</sup>ETH Zürich, Switzerland

<sup>5</sup>United States Studies Centre, University of Sydney, Australia

<sup>6</sup>Atlantic Council, Washington, DC, USA

<sup>7</sup>Khalifa University, Abu Dhabi, UAE

<sup>8</sup>University of Florence, Italy

## Corresponding Author:

Gabriele Abbondanza, Comillas Pontifical University, Madrid 28049, Spain.

Email: [gabbondanza@comillas.edu](mailto:gabbondanza@comillas.edu)

## Introduction

Now that it is well into its third decade, the twenty-first century is marked by profound dynamism and a high degree of uncertainty. On the one hand, it is riddled with non-traditional security challenges comprising, among others, climate change, irregular migrations, human rights violations, new technological advancements and their militarisation, and the weaponisation of both economic power and states' interdependence, in addition to the full spectrum of human (in)security.<sup>1</sup> On the other, for all the novelty of many of these elements, traditional security issues such as power transitions, growing revisionism, inter- and intra-state conflicts and wars, ethnic, racial, or religious cleansings, and hybrid challenges, continue to aggravate the twenty-first century's volatile strategic landscape.<sup>2</sup>

In this context, the Indo-Pacific stands out as an all-important region for several reasons. First, its colossal economic significance is evident in the fact that it accounts for approximately two-thirds of the world's population, gross domestic product, and maritime trade.<sup>3</sup> Second, it is rapidly becoming the global centre stage for new politico-normative interactions, as exemplified by the ever-growing number of regional partnerships – be them development, dialogue, or strategic partnerships – alignments, and states' memberships of regional fora and/or minilaterals.<sup>4</sup> Third, the Indo-Pacific is highly emblematic of the substantial security challenges mentioned earlier. To name but a few, China-US competition, numerous regional frictions, multiple potential flashpoints – including Taiwan, East and South China Seas, the Korean Peninsula, the China-India and the India-Pakistan borders – as well as rising hybrid threats.<sup>5</sup> Fourth, the Indo-Pacific has emerged as a key arena for twenty-first-century technological competition, given its concentration of critical technology supply chains, which account for over 90 percent of advanced semiconductor production and 70 percent of rare earth processing.<sup>6</sup> This condition has intensified US-China rivalry while concurrently compelling regional actors to navigate between rival supply networks and different digital standards and policies. Fifth, notwithstanding all the above, this macro-region also embodies the opportunities inherent in an evolving and “multiplex” international system,<sup>7</sup> as represented by a burgeoning human capital and vast potential for new economic, normative, and security cooperation both within and without the region.

Such momentous issues have not gone unnoticed, with experts understandably focusing on the (extra)regional responses of superpowers, major powers, and middle powers amid these evolving trajectories.<sup>8</sup> Concurrently, the foreign policies, and related predicaments, of regional and minor powers have also been assessed by the extant scholarship, albeit to a lesser extent compared to actors with a greater weight in the region. However, the role of less conventional players has been largely neglected in the disciplinary literature. To be sure, there are select valuable studies that help to broaden the scope of “Indo-Pacific studies” in the international relations (IR) discipline, including those on revisionist powers' rejection of this regional construct<sup>9</sup>; the role of the Indian Ocean Rim Association<sup>10</sup>; cross-regional cooperation<sup>11</sup>; Pacific Island Countries,<sup>12</sup> and European and South American liminal powers.<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless, despite rare investigations centred on less typical regional interactions, the nature and level of engagement on the part of Unconventional Indo-Pacific Actors

– whether institutionally atypical, geographically peripheral or fully extra-regional, or functionally distinct – remains severely under-examined in the IR scholarship. In other words, the Indo-Pacific goals and means of such entities are neither directly addressed by the existing research nor collectively surveyed by edited issues or volumes. While the relative recency of the region’s global significance makes this somewhat understandable, the Indo-Pacific’s meteoric rise in global affairs nevertheless warrants addressing this conspicuous lacuna, precisely the task undertaken by this Forum. Accordingly, the notion advanced by this article is defined as follows: Unconventional Indo-Pacific Actors are states or organisations whose influence on regional dynamics does not necessarily derive from traditional material capabilities or regional location, but rather from atypical institutional positioning, geographically peripheral or extra-regional anchoring, or functionally specialised capacities. They may lack formal recognition as core regional actors and their role is invariably understudied, yet they are beginning to focus their economic, normative, and/or security agendas on this macro-region through distinctive tools, objectives, or areas of expertise that diverge from conventional Indo-Pacific mechanisms.

With such premises, this Forum aims to offer a novel contribution to the study of the region, by providing the first collection of articles on Unconventional Indo-Pacific Actors. While the goal of addressing under-examined yet increasingly-topical subjects through new lenses is certainly not new in international relations, as comparable notions have been applied to other realms of the IR discipline,<sup>14</sup> no dedicated appraisal has been devoted to atypical Indo-Pacific actors, which highlights the novelty of this Forum. The rationale, in this case, is that the Indo-Pacific is a region with such geopolitical and geoeconomic gravitas that it is increasingly attracting diverse actors with no foreign policy tradition anchored in this macro-region. Due to the very nature of such actors, which are heterogenous by definition, all articles in this Forum adopt a common theoretical approach and systematically employ the same analytical framework (as per below), according to the principles of the comparative case study method, to enhance the comparability of otherwise different case studies and draw meaningful conclusions.

Having stated what this collective research seeks to achieve, it is equally useful to clarify what it does not set out to do. Specifically, this and the other articles do not aim to provide a comprehensive account of the case studies’ foreign policies in their entirety, chiefly due to space limitations and to the focus on their understudied Indo-Pacific interactions. Moreover, they make no pretence to comprehensiveness in terms of all Unconventional Indo-Pacific Actors that are beginning to engage with this macro-region. Rather, they provide a selection of representative case studies which can hopefully act as a stepping stone to a broader – and more diverse – understanding of the multiplicity of actors that are gradually pivoting to the Indo-Pacific, beyond substantial and/or geographically-relevant powers that have been extensively surveyed.

To address the above, this article is structured as follows. Following this broad section, it introduces the different interpretations of the Indo-Pacific notions and it outlines the “who,” “how,” and “why” of this Forum by presenting its case studies, their common theoretical and methodological approach, and the analytical framework that all articles adopt. Next, it traces the Forum’s main findings across the analytical criteria that guide its investigation, thereby exemplifying the geopolitical and geoeconomic attractiveness of this all-important region, prior to presenting the conclusions. The main findings are

fivefold. First, Unconventional Indo-Pacific Actors approach the region with highly-specific sets of goals. Second, their actual regional impact often lags behind official rhetoric. Third, normative agency, trade ties, and/or ad hoc initiatives tend to substitute for fully-fledged Indo-Pacific strategic reorientations. Fourth, both endogenous and exogenous constraints contribute to the case studies' "unconventionality". Fifth, despite these limitations, all cases display a marked upward trajectory of engagement in the region, illustrating the lengths to which Unconventional Actors will go to compensate for their atypical regional status and to harness the Indo-Pacific's meteoric geopolitical and geoeconomic rise in global politics.

## **Unconventional Indo-Pacific Actors: Who, Why, and How**

Before addressing this Forum's case studies, their relevance, and the comparative analysis concerning them, it is appropriate to define the definitional perimeter traced by this collective study. Similarly to most key concepts in IR, there is no universally-accepted definition of the Indo-Pacific. Without embarking on lengthy discussions that would inevitably fall out of this article's scope (it is useful to refer to pertinent definitional discussions that have been carried out elsewhere<sup>15</sup>), it is still possible to succinctly expound the four main understandings that have been attached to this macro-region. To begin with, especially during the transition from the prior "Asia-Pacific" to the current "Indo-Pacific," a number of actors sought to interact with the meteoric rise of many Asian economies with a view to boost trade flows.<sup>16</sup> This initial approach was centred on East and Southeast Asia and was therefore geographically narrow. Next, the United States and its key regional allies – chiefly Australia and Japan – added a strategic layer to this new narrative, with the goal of containing China's rise and both broaden and diversify regional alignments. This US-led approach viewed the Indo-Pacific as an oval macro-region stretching from India and the Central Indian Ocean towards the North American continent, though without embracing the African, Central American, or South American shores.<sup>17</sup> Conversely, a counter-strategic narrative soon emerged from the main revisionist powers – China and Russia – and their few proxies, aiming to deny the existence of the Indo-Pacific and claiming the divisive nature thereof.<sup>18</sup>

Lastly, a much broader regional vision gradually rose, highlighting the many avenues for cooperation, that is not just strategically or economically, but also logistically, scientifically, culturally, and politically. This more nuanced understanding of this macro-region, adopted by numerous Asian and European states and organisations, in addition to other actors, is also supported by larger geographical boundaries, which include all states facing the Indian and/or the Pacific oceans.<sup>19</sup> While there are obvious overlaps – by way of example, Japan simultaneously advances both the broader and the US-led visions – these four categories help to better analyse the complex Indo-Pacific concept and provide the necessary definitional background to this research. The latter, given its endeavour to shed light on Unconventional Indo-Pacific Actors, adopts the fourth and conceptually-wider understanding of what this region is.

Starting from these definitional premises, this Forum advances the case for Unconventional Indo-Pacific Actors and adopts four case studies as representative cases of this condition. These are Ethiopia, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO),

**Table 1.** Unconventional Indo-Pacific Actors: The Comparative Framework.

| Category     | Main Elements                                                                   |
|--------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Definitional | Each case study's "unconventionality"                                           |
| Theoretical  | Neoclassical realism and/or neoliberalism                                       |
| Analytical   | Five parameters: trade; norms; security; external pressures; posture and trends |

South Africa, and Turkey. As can be seen, these are institutionally atypical (NATO), geographically peripheral (Ethiopia and South Africa), extra-regional (Turkey), and functionally distinct (NATO), as per the selection criteria mentioned earlier in this article, and yet they are also tangibly displaying their growing interest in this region through different sets of goals and means. This selection of Unconventional Indo-Pacific Actors is emblematic of the diversity and complexity behind this notion, as it comprises two African states (Ethiopia and South Africa, at the westernmost quadrant of the Indo-Pacific), an extra-regional power with cross-regional ambitions (Turkey), and an international organisation with a geographical mandate that marks it as an atypical, if not an impossible, regional player (NATO).

While other case studies may have well served the purpose, these have been selected on the basis of their "unconventionality" in the region, their diverse institutional nature, and their atypical geographical location or focus. To further clarify the case study selection justification, it is appropriate to underline that even though there are eleven Central and South American states that fit the Indo-Pacific's broadest definition, none of them are currently displaying noticeable policies to elevate their regional relations<sup>20</sup> (although this is likely to change in the coming years), so they have not been included in this Forum. In essence, the cases that have been chosen are remarkably diverse precisely because they represent the "unconventionality" of new actors gradually pivoting to the Indo-Pacific. Put differently, far from "mixing apples with pears," this selection shows that different actors from different regions – and with different interests – are all starting to approach this macro-region, which calls for a dedicated appraisal of them.

With the "who" and "why" addressed, it is apt to tackle the "how" question, thereby expounding the Forum's tripartite comparative approach (Table 1). In methodological terms, the Forum adopts a "Structured, Focused" method to better implement the qualitative and comparative research it undertakes. This time-tested methodological approach consists in having several case-studies wherein each of them is approached through a standard set of research criteria.<sup>21</sup> Accordingly, all articles engage with three distinct yet complementary elements: a brief appraisal of their case study's "unconventionality" according to the definition set out earlier in this article, a concise theoretical approach, and a specific analytical framework. This design offers relevant and comparable evidence across heterogeneous actors and thus enables cautious cross-case generalisations.

Shifting from methods to theory, even though the latter is meant to be deliberately succinct in this policy-oriented collection of articles – considering that they deal with nascent Indo-Pacific policies rather than conceptual matters – it nevertheless permits to nuance the investigations' empirical analyses. The lenses that have been selected are two specific versions of the some of the most-established IR paradigms: neoclassical realism

(especially given its insights into the influence of the domestic domain on foreign policy formulation<sup>22</sup>) and/or neoliberalism (particularly as it emphasises international cooperation and external pressures<sup>23</sup>). While all authors engage with one or both of these theories in their articles, they do so in the way that they deem more appropriate for their specific case study.

With reference to the analytical framework, which represents a “red thread” binding the whole Forum together, it aims to assess the most significant elements surrounding the engagement of Unconventional Indo-Pacific Actors. Accordingly, the five common parameters are: (i) *trade* ties with the region; (ii) *political-normative* interests in the region; (iii) *security* interests in the region (including the absence thereof); (iv) *external pressures* promoting (or inhibiting) interaction with the Indo-Pacific; and (v) current Indo-Pacific *posture* and related *trends*. As can be seen, this framework permits investigation of the principal arenas of regional engagement (trade, norms, security), as well as the exogenous factors and contemporary posture that shape behaviour. As with the theoretical framework, all contributors employ these parameters in their articles, though they interpret and use them according to the specificities of their case study.

To make the framework analytically useful while remaining flexible, contributors translate each parameter into concrete indicators suited to their cases. Trade ties are assessed by metrics such as trade and investment volumes, bilateral agreements, and supply-chain linkages. Political-normative interests are traced with diplomatic rhetoric, participation in regional fora and institution-building, and norm promotion. Security interests are outlined through Unconventional Indo-Pacific Actors’ capabilities, exercises, partnership activities, or, conversely, notable absence thereof. External pressures are understood as allied encouragement, economic coercion, and domestic political constraints. Lastly, posture and trends are delineated by focusing on trajectory (deepening, hedging, or retrenchment) and policy signalling. Methodologically, contributors combine qualitative and quantitative sources – official documents, speeches, trade statistics, and elite interviews – enabling both cross-case comparison and within-case depth. The framework is deliberately parsimonious: it provides a common analytic language that highlights commonalities and differences across Unconventional Indo-Pacific Actors, while preserving the capacity to capture each actor’s unique pathway into the Indo-Pacific.

## The Goals, Means, and Limitations of Unconventional Indo-Pacific Actors

The Forum’s articles provide valuable insights into the case studies’ diverse approaches to the Indo-Pacific. To begin with, Donelli and Cosatti examine Ethiopia’s engagement, showing how a landlocked, primarily continental state seeks to assert a role in maritime debates. The country pursues an outward-looking strategy based on imperial memory, diplomatic initiatives, port-access arrangements via third-party partnerships, and participation in security dialogues emphasising the importance of stable regional trade routes. Conceptually, Ethiopia’s approach reframes the Indo-Pacific as a flexible geopolitical space that continental actors can enter by redefining access and influence. Empirically,

however, the picture is ambivalent as aspirations exceed material capabilities. Domestic governance challenges, resource constraints, and competition for regional influence limit Ethiopia's ability to translate rhetoric into maritime capability. Externally, its manoeuvring is shaped by Gulf and Horn dynamics, which both enable and constrain its reach. Ethiopia shows that unconventionality can be performative: even without a navy, states can engage maritime debates through targeted initiatives, though the durability of such endeavours ultimately depends on investments and favourable regional architectures.

Grgić and Abbondanza show that NATO's unconventionality lies in its role as a cross-regional coordination platform, rather than a regional security guarantor. NATO has expanded its threat assessment to include China's systemic effects, non-territorial domains, and deepened cooperation with the Indo-Pacific Four (IP4) through flagship projects, working groups, and industrial dialogues. These efforts translate alliance procedural capacities into tangible partner benefits – standardised attribution practices, interoperability protocols, and initiatives to diversify and scale industrial capacity – without invoking Article 5 commitments. The limits are equally clear: unanimity requirements, divergent member priorities, and partner sensitivities constrain both depth and speed. The core finding is that NATO can materially enhance partner resilience and align like-minded states through platformised cooperation, but its Indo-Pacific role will deepen only if members sustain investment and partners internalise shared standards; otherwise, NATO's influence will remain practical but highly circumscribed.

Wu and Otto demonstrate how South Africa emerges as a geographically peripheral but normatively consequential Indo-Pacific actor. Its influence does not stem from hard power projection but from institutional positioning, historical links to the Indian Ocean, and an emphasis on multilateral platforms (IORA, G20) and the Indian Ocean as a zone of peace. Tangible outputs include multilateral policy coordination, participation in maritime dialogues, and support for freedom of navigation and development cooperation, albeit without a commensurate defence capacity. While South Africa thus exemplifies normative agency, constraints remain salient: limited material capacity, competing domestic priorities, and external pressures restrict its ability to convert norms into leverage. Overall, South Africa pursues a strategy of cautious, selective engagement, seeking to preserve strategic autonomy while leveraging institutional roles to “punch above its weight,” although its influence remains contingent on material capabilities, institutional credibility, and external demands.

Cannon's analysis shows that Türkiye's Indo-Pacific activity is rooted in a national role conception as an Afro-Eurasian “centre country,” resulting in selective, instrumental engagement rather than a full strategic reorientation. Empirically, Türkiye blends symbolic initiatives (high-level visits, participation in maritime exercises) with transactional ties (arms sales, defence cooperation, industrial partnerships) to secure footholds in Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean littoral. This approach is opportunistic and calibrated, targeting areas where domestic industrial capacity and diplomatic leverage overlap while avoiding commitments that would generate irreconcilable tensions with major powers. Constraints are twofold: domestic political dynamics and authoritarian drift complicate cooperation with liberal democracies, while Türkiye's simultaneous NATO membership and pursuit of autonomous regional initiatives create frictions with both Western and regional actors. Analytically, Ankara illustrates how middle powers with

trans-regional identities can shape Indo-Pacific agendas through niche capabilities and selective activism, without becoming major maritime powers.

As these contributions attest, no other region attracts, divides, and engages to the same extent as the Indo-Pacific. The Forum's five articles provide valuable conceptual and empirical tools to better understand the goals, means, and limitations of Unconventional Indo-Pacific Actors. They thus underscore that agency in the Indo-Pacific extends beyond traditional naval powers, making it essential to consider unconventional, cross-regional, and capacity-constrained actors in both empirical analysis and theory-building. While it makes no pretence to comprehensiveness in terms of all potential atypical players that are beginning to approach the Indo-Pacific, this Forum does hope to offer fertile ground for new research endeavours focused on this conceptually elusive yet critically important region.

### ORCID iDs

Gabriele Abbondanza  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1036-2884>

Gorana Grgić  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1825-9427>

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## **Author Biographies**

**Gabriele Abbondanza** is a Senior Lecturer in International Relations at Comillas Pontifical University, Associate Fellow at the Italian Institute of International Affairs (IAI), and GEMI Researcher at the Complutense University of Madrid. He also serves on the Scientific Board of the NATO Defense College Foundation. His expertise centres on the Indo-Pacific, irregular migration governance, the foreign policy of several countries (including Australia and Italy), and great power and middle power theory. He has published numerous books and journal articles on these topics, and frequently contributes to institutional, public, and media debates.

**Gorana Grgić** is the Head of the Global Security team at ETH Zürich's Center for Security Studies. She is also a Non-Resident Senior Scholar at the United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney, and a Non-Resident Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council's Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security. Her research interests include US and EU foreign policy, NATO, and the nexus between Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific security. Her research projects and teaching activities have been funded by the European Commission, NATO, Australian Research Council, Australian Department of Defence, and the United States Institute of Peace.

**Luigi Martino** is professor of cybersecurity and global politics at the University of Bologna, and is Research Scientist and Principal Investigator at Khalifa University. Martino is also the Director of the Italian Hub for Cyber and Space, and Director of the Center for Cyber Security and International Relations Studies at the University of Florence. He is affiliated with institutions such as MIT, UCL (STeAPP), the University of Kent, Bocconi University, and ISPI.