

The Colombo Plan towards the Indo-Pacific: exploratory diplomacy of the long 1950s
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The ‘Indo-Pacific’ concept is not new: the German geopolitician Karl Haushofer used the term ‘Indo-Pacific area’ in the 1920s. But the concept of an economic and strategic system spanning the Western Pacific to the Indian Ocean has become a commonplace over the last decade – deployed by politicians, diplomats, pundits and scholars. In June 2017 US President Donald Trump and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi spoke of their two countries as ‘responsible stewards in the Indo-Pacific region’.

In its various articulations the Indo-Pacific is a mix of regional states and those heavily invested in the region. Leaders of Indonesia, Japan and India are amongst those who have helped shape the idea, and Australians have given it prominence in official papers and pronouncements. Most promoters of the Indo-Pacific concept include therein the United States, and indeed, Americans are some of its loudest advocates. China’s presence is more ambiguous. While some, not least from China itself, insist that the country’s presence is essential, others wonder if the Indo-Pacific concept is a construct aimed at countering China’s rise.¹ What is clear is that this idea of a hybrid region will continue to attract attention and generate debate.

But where does this idea come from? This project explores its origins after the Second World War. The post-1945 period is distinctive in ways that anticipate current debates. The aftermath of the conflict created tensions between ideas of nation and of region, between colonial powers and newly-independent states, and fuelled power struggles shaped by the dynamics of Cold War, internationalism and modernisation. In ways that were exploratory and contested, new states joined in planning for South and Southeast Asia, both with each other and also with a collection of highly invested western powers. Today, we would

¹ See He Baogang, *Contested Ideas of Regionalism in Asia*, Routledge, Abingdon, 2013; and Baogang’s ‘Chinese Expanded Perceptions of Region and its changing attitudes toward the Indo-Pacific: a hybrid vision of the institutionalization of the Indo-Pacific’, *East Asia* 35, 2018, 117-32; Chengxin Pan, ‘The “Indo-Pacific” and geopolitical anxieties about China’s rise in the Asian regional order’, *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 68, 4, 2014, 453-69; Rory Medcalf, ‘In defence of the Indo-Pacific: Australia’s new strategic map’, *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 68, 2014, 470-83.

describe them as members of the Global South in negotiation with members of the Global North. This project considers the case of a multilateral enabler of such exchanges, the Colombo Plan for Co-operative Economic Development in South and Southeast Asia, which formed in 1950-51 and boasted 23 members from inside and outside the region by the start of the next decade. I draw on the Colombo Plan and its mission of economic development to expose a neglected organisation that shaped and energised new inter- and trans-national relationships across the region in the particularly formative period of the 1950s and early 1960s. I look particularly at the work of development entrepreneurs, the aid projects, the diplomatic encounters behind them and the publicity and promotional efforts that presented them to the wider world. Here we see some of the roots of Indo-Pacific.

The meetings and activities characterising the Colombo Plan also help us to keep in perspective powerful postwar themes such as the Cold War and modernisation. Those two interpretive themes are indispensable to understand the ideology and realities of power in aid diplomacy in a decolonising world. But such grand scale framings tend to prioritise perspectives of the West from whence they evolved, even in excellent studies where the agency of actors in the South is made clear.² They make it harder to grasp the exploratory dimension of new diplomatic and informal encounters between and among the Global South and Global North. As Frederick Cooper puts it, they flatten out dimensions of the decolonising process such as the instability of boundaries shaping concepts of inclusion, exclusion and difference.³ Others have joined Cooper in reminding us of the regional-mindedness of state leaders prior to their independence from colonial rule.⁴ They highlight

² For example, see David C. Engerman, *The Price of Aid: the Economic Cold War in India*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass, 2018.

³ Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History*, University of California Press, 2005, pp.3-32. Cooper, focused on decolonizing French Africa, has also reminded us of the federated possibilities there that competed with any neat transition from colony to nation-state, and the debates on post-independence citizenship that drew from French imperial experience but imagined other ways of thinking about rights and obligations: Frederick Cooper, *Citizenship between Empire and Nation: Remaking France and French Africa, 1945-1960*, Princeton University Press, 2014.

⁴ See, for example, Tomoko Akami on inter-colonialism: Tomoko Akami, 'Imperial polities, intercolonialism, and the shaping of global governing norms: public health experts in Asia and the League of Nations Health Organization, 1908-37', *Journal of Global History*, 2017, 12, 1, 4-25; and Sarah Stockwell on the non-state, institutional aspect of drawn-out decolonisation: Sarah Stockwell, *The British End of the British Empire*, Cambridge University Press, 2018. John Agnew's work on 'sovereignty regimes' rather than sovereignty defaulting to the singular nation-state can apply to the postwar years: John Agnew, *Globalization and Sovereignty*, Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham Md, 2009. And for the case study of the postwar Commonwealth, see, Daniel Haines, 'A "Commonwealth Moment" in South Asian Decolonization', in James

the need for new histories of these times. Whether the case studies are African, Asian or elsewhere, histories of the mid-century that move smoothly from colony to independence, and then full sovereignty vested in the post-colonial nation-state, do not stand up under closer historical scrutiny.

Launched in 1951, the Colombo Plan reached a milestone in 1957 at the end of its first series of six-year economic development programs for countries of the region, and its members declared their collective willingness to see the Plan continue. The meeting of the Colombo Plan's Consultative Committee that year was held in the Republic of Vietnam. When President Ngo Dinh Diem rose to welcome representatives of the 21 nations present in Saigon he faced something of a test, as this was the first time the Committee had met in a non-Commonwealth country. The British, in particular, had not believed that it would be possible for the Vietnamese to handle such a meeting.⁵ Diem, however, was up to the task. He offered greetings that included now-familiar references to East-West bridge-building and celebration of linguistic and cultural diversity, and he placed particular store on what he saw as the informal, organic quality of the Colombo Plan and its logical genesis in the Commonwealth:

We all share in the uniqueness of the Colombo Plan. Like the great Commonwealth of Nations which gave it birth, the Plan is a voluntary and flexible arrangement, imbued with the practical idealism of raising man's lot to a higher station. I note with pleasure that the Plan is not encumbered by formal treaties; its hallmarks are the more enduring and universal values of good-will and free participation, of learning from each other, of helping each other, and of forging lasting friendships.

As no other institution, the Colombo Plan demonstrates that dominance, arrogance, and imposition can be replaced by mutual respect, free negotiation, and cooperation. I can conceive of no better way to draw nations together.⁶

Diem is better remembered for his controversial rule of the Republic of Vietnam from 1955 to his assassination in 1963. But some of the key concepts he highlighted in 1957 made the

Leslie and Elisabeth Leake (eds), *Decolonization and the Cold War: Negotiating Independence*, Bloomsbury, London, 2015, pp. 185-202.

⁵ Memorandum of Conversation, Jack Corbett, US Dept of State and J.R.A. Bottomley, First Secretary, British Embassy, Washington, 8 February 1957, decimal series, 890.00/2-857, United States National Archives and Records Administration College Park, Maryland, US (hereafter NARA),

⁶ Address by Ngo Dinh Diem at Inaugural session of Ministerial Meeting of Consultative Committee on Co-operative Economic Development in South and South-East Asia, Saigon, 21 October 1957, RG 25 vol. 7360 11038-5-c-40 Pt 2 FP2, Library and National Archives Canada, Ottawa (hereafter LAC).

Colombo Plan distinctive at the time, and also enigmatic. His emphasis on the lack of formal treaty, and his sense of cumulative learning through meeting and relationship-building were accurate, even if now they might now seem woolly. The Colombo Plan was an important feature of the burgeoning sphere of activities that was called ‘development’ for Asia in the 1950s. To recall development – a term not used by Diem in the above extract but prominent in many delegates’ speeches of 1957 – requires both acknowledgement of its persistence in governmental lexicon today and its fate in the hands of vigorous critics. Whether critiqued for its facilitation of south-north dependency, for being harnessed to a re-colonisation or modernization project that eroded state sovereignty as it promised unrealistic material riches, or for constantly falling prey to Cold War interests and other forms of self-interested realism, development now carries a raft of suspicions. During the 1950s and early 1960s, however, it was a vehicle not only towards modernisation but to new forms of diplomacy and international and transnational exchanges.

The focus here is on the long 1950s, a period stretching from the start of the decade, 1950, when the Colombo Plan took shape, to 1962, the year marking the start of systematic statistical reporting on foreign aid by the new OECD Development Assistance Committee. This apparently nerdish point is of real significance. Taken in conjunction with the recent formation of specialised aid agencies in countries such as Canada (1960), the United States (1961), and Japan (1961) it marked a new professionalization and its embedding of foreign aid as a function of the modern state. Previously, those reporting on development efforts enjoyed considerable license, and were able to move in a slippery way between statistics and free-wheeling narratives. Importantly, too, it would be the middle of the 1960s before the first detailed, non-socialist critiques of development projects in Asia emerged.⁷ The Colombo Plan in the long 1950s therefore escaped both the rigours of standardised, professional reporting, and the reputational erosion from sustained, scholarly critique.

Two additional aspects of this period attest to its distinctiveness. The first was the enduring significance of the Commonwealth. As Diem remarked, the Colombo Plan began as a Commonwealth venture in 1950, but quickly added non-Commonwealth members to its

⁷ This is excepting novels exposing the *Quiet American* (1955) and *Ugly American* (1958).

ranks including the United States and Japan, as donors, and the Philippines, Burma, Thailand and Indonesia as regional members. The Commonwealth was regarded by most members as a loose-fitting source of strength, part-model and part-entwined with how the Colombo Plan grew and functioned. Its potency and exemplary status diminished from the early 1960s in the wake of both internal divisions, especially the racial issue that led to South Africa's withdrawal in 1961, and external forces.

And more fundamentally, the long 1950s was the period of maximum exploratory work in diplomacy in and about Asia. It includes the famous Asian-African Conference of 1955 held in Bandung, but its longer stretch also enables a shift away from Bandung's gravitational pull. The Colombo Plan Consultative Committee's recurring annual meetings of between three and four weeks, usually in October-November, were important events in diplomatic calendars. For the historian, they offer rich pickings and revealing insights beyond that one-off gathering of 29 African and Asian nations for one week of 1955 in Bandung. Although convention at Consultative Committee meetings meant no grand announcements and no resolutions, or rather *because* they involved no grand announcements and resolutions, they became regular safe spaces for negotiating between different aspects of Cold War polarity; and from 1955, negotiating the new dynamic created by Bandung.

At the 1957 session, as with previous ones, the air was thick with references to friendship, national growth as maturation, and a broader conceptualisation of economic development that embraced values and dignity.⁸ Amongst the other ministerial opening remarks, Australia's External Affairs Minister R. G. Casey reflected that one under-appreciated benefit of the Colombo Plan's operation was the holding of its annual conference in a different country each year. He added that between the first meetings in 1950-51 to this one in 1957, the number of ministers and officials had grown, in line with new memberships, from around 50 to around 150. This, he said, 'gives us all opportunities to meet the leading personalities in Governments and see the people that they represent in their own particular home and environment.'⁹

⁸ See comments by Shri B.R. Bhagat, Deputy Minister of Finance, India, and Hon. U. Raschid, Minister for Mines, Burma, 21 October 1957, RG 25 vol. 7360 11038-5-c-40 Pt 2 FP2, LAC.

⁹ Comments by R.G Casey, 21 October 1957, *ibid*.

The Colombo Plan provided for personalities who became custodians of its aims as well as working for governments. There grew a network of entrepreneurial officials whose careers flourished with this new international organisation. The increased mobility provided by air travel, and the dependence of politicians on seasoned bureaucrats for advice in an expanded diplomatic sphere gave a cohort influence which they happily seized. From Ceylon, for example, Rajendra Coomaraswamy moved between representation for his government to seniority within the Colombo Plan organisation, twice president of the Colombo Plan Council, and then head of the UN Development Program's Asia and Pacific Bureau in 1961. Indian economist, C.V Narasimhan cut his teeth in early Colombo Plan meetings before becoming Executive Director of the United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE) in 1956, and later rising to UN seniority in New York. And Canadian Nik Cavell was the flamboyant 'go to' person in Ottawa for policy guidance on Canada's burgeoning contacts with South and Southeast Asia. Cavell's expertise, based on earlier experiences in India, including serving in the Cavalry branch of the Indian Army, also propelled him around the region as the Canadian face of the Colombo Plan. Coomaraswamy, Narasimhan, Cavell and others were custodians of Colombo Plan ideals. Their agency within and outside governments has been under-estimated.

As Diem pointed out, the Colombo Plan was flexible. It was an umbrella that covered primarily bilateral capital aid flows and forms of technical assistance between donor and recipient countries. It had no co-ordinating secretariat. For set-piece exchanges, members relied on these annual meetings of the Colombo Plan's Consultative Committee. It was at these meetings that the work of reporting on current projects and embarking on new ones took place. Otherwise, a very modest bureaucracy around technical assistance grew, in fits and starts, in Colombo. From 1951, there was a Colombo Plan Council overseeing the technical assistance side of the Colombo Plan (ie scholarships for training, and the provision of experts) and supported by a Bureau. In 1953 a small Information Unit was created, also in Colombo; and from 1957 these two were merged into an enhanced version of the Bureau that enabled the ramping up of information activity. If the Colombo Plan had been a 'plan' with only a small 'p' in the early 1950s, its entrepreneurial custodians then got to work on making it more of a capital 'P', elevating their claims for the collective aid efforts.

Two further aspects of the Colombo Plan's operation stand out for their importance to those interested in questions of new diplomacy, foreign aid and regionalism in decolonising Asia. The first is the importance of place and practices. This relates to the meetings of the Consultative Committee at different locations throughout the region, and it also applies to development projects that developed iconic status. Hosting a Consultative Committee meeting was, for nations older and new, important for international standing; and maintaining the non-confrontational behaviour at meetings was essential to their success. The high publicity around meetings and for certain development or training projects meant that some features of the Colombo Plan were bound to stand out and endure in its remembering, more than others. This also connects with the second important aspect, the significance of information provision through multiple forms of media. In the hands of skilled publicists, both in Colombo and in member countries, the production of stories and images enabled the Colombo Plan to assume grand proportions while smoothing over persisting echoes of inequality and colonialism. The public faces of the Colombo Plan constituted a glowing official history, written as the various activities unfolded.

This study is based partly on the use of a wide lens – the libraries and archives of Commonwealth countries such as Australia, Britain, Canada, India and New Zealand – and partly on different media forms such as newspapers, photographs, films, booklets, stamps, creative writing and related paraphernalia. As my focus is on the context and production of policy, generously-defined, the main agents can be called 'elites', but these elites include cohorts of mid-tier experts, journalists and advisers who have rarely figured in international histories of the 1950s.

In my paper for the World History series, I will combine the wide archival and materials lens with a focus that is manageable by focusing mostly on two years of Colombo Plan activity, 1956 and 1959, in ways that hopefully illustrate the above key themes of the project.