



SPOTLIGHTS

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Professor Rory Medcalf on the Indo-Pacific

Interviewed by Dinusha Panditaratne and Barana Waidyatilake*

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***Dr. Dinusha Panditaratne** is the Executive Director at the Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute of International Relations and Strategic Studies (LKI). **Barana Waidyatilake** is a Research Fellow at LKI. This interview was originally published by the Daily FT (Sri Lanka). The opinions expressed in this transcript are the interviewee's own views and are not the institutional views of LKI.

The Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute (LKI) recently interviewed Professor Rory Medcalf, Head of the National Security College (NSC) at the Australian National University (ANU), as part of the LKI Spotlight series. The LKI Spotlight series features interviews with thought leaders around the world, on key and emerging issues of international relations.

This interview focuses on the concept of the Indo-Pacific, the emerging security groupings in the region, possibilities for Sri Lanka-Australia cooperation on regional security issues, and lessons to be learned from other states in the region in addressing such issues.

Prof. Medcalf's background spans diplomacy, intelligence analysis, think tanks and journalism. Prior to his appointment as Head of the NSC, he was the Director of the International Security Program at the Lowy Institute, a leading think tank based in Sydney. He has also worked as a senior strategic analyst with the Office of National Assessments in Canberra. His experience as an Australian diplomat included a posting to New Delhi, a secondment to Japan's Foreign Ministry, and truce monitoring after the civil conflict in Bougainville.

Prof. Medcalf has contributed to three landmark global reports on nuclear arms control. He has also been active in developing Australia's relations with India. He is the founding convener and co-chair of the Australia-India Roundtable, the leading informal policy dialogue between the two countries. He holds non-resident affiliations with the Brookings Institution and the Lowy Institute, and was a member of the independent expert panel providing advice on the Australian Government's 2015 Defence White Paper. He is a sought-after commentator on regional security, especially on the topic of the Indo-Pacific.

See below for a lightly edited transcript of the interview, featuring Prof. Medcalf's responses to questions posed by Dr. Dinusha Panditaratne, Executive Director of LKI, with contributions from Barana Waidyatilake, Research Fellow of LKI. The audio of this interview is available as a podcast on LKI's SoundCloud channel. The questions and other aspects expressed in this interview are not the institutional views of LKI; and they do not necessarily represent or reflect the position of any other institution or individual with which the parties are affiliated. This interview was originally published in the Daily FT.

LKI: Prof. Medcalf, if we can start on what seems to be the security concept of the moment – the Indo-Pacific. This is a concept which has received the backing of the current US government, in contrast to the Obama administration, that preferred to use the term Asia-Pacific rather than Indo-Pacific. I was wondering if this, in your opinion, indicates a significant shift in US strategic vision; or perhaps does it indicate American detachment from the region by falling back on a concept that other regional powers such as Australia and Japan have been promoting for some time now?

Prof. Medcalf: That's a disturbingly insightful question. I do think that – although your second option there is intriguing – I'm convinced that the first option is more compelling. That is, that the United States is – not just at the presidential level, not just at the top of the administration, but throughout the system – beginning to recognise the structural inevitability of this Indo-Pacific way of understanding our region. Both strategically and economically, we are seeing the connections, the interconnections between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific and between South and East Asia, deepen and intensify – much of it because of China's expanding interests and capability, and not necessarily because of India's or America's or others. But this affects all of us, so the United States is frankly getting on board with the Indo-Pacific concept.

Now to go to your earlier point, the Indo-Pacific is a concept where there is no one precise or correct interpretation, but there is a broad understanding that we can no longer understand the Indian Ocean or the Pacific, South Asia or East Asia, Indian Ocean or Asia Pacific in isolation from one another. The strategic dynamics are such that the behaviour of major powers in one or other parts of this region has wider effects. The interests of the East Asian powers, particularly, China but also Japan, South Korea and smaller East Asian countries to some extent, and indeed Australia - these interests are extending into the Indian ocean more and more, and of course, India with its Act East Policy is beginning to play more in an East Asian space.

So it is increasingly becoming one system. And I would just add one final point to that - it's not quite so, from my perspective, that the Obama administration was oblivious to, or even against an Indo-Pacific way of framing the region. In fact, they were precursors in the 'pivot', the rebalance - in the rhetoric of Hillary Clinton and Kurt Campbell, and the Obama administration, if you choose; and particularly in the development of the India-US strategic relationship ever since the Bush administration; but also the intensification of the US-Australia alliance under Obama, which was in fact described as an Indo-Pacific alliance by Hillary Clinton around 2010/2011. So I think in many ways, they were precursors of the Indo-Pacific. Then what has happened in the last few years is that particularly, Japan and India and Australia have incorporated the Indo-Pacific idea into their own strategic policies. Australia indeed, in our Defence White Paper in 2013, was the first country to formally define its region as the Indo-Pacific, and in some ways, I think it is the influence of those countries that has really got the United States onboard now.

Finally, I don't think that this is just about Trump; in fact I think the US Indo-Pacific strategy is likely to well and truly outlive the Trump administration, and it will provide a framework and a logic for the United States and its allies and partners, but also for other countries, offering a vision of the region that is not simply China's Belt and Road Initiative.

LKI: *Thank you for describing in such detail, the evolution of the United States' approach to the Indo-Pacific, and showing how it wasn't a sort of sudden about-turn, but rather a gradual process of recognition which has reached its moment now, and that will, in your view, endure well beyond this US administration.*

You referred to the Indo-Pacific as a concept that doesn't have a single definition, but is also one system. There are leaders and policymakers in the region - including amongst the Sri Lankan leadership - who have indicated that they view the Indian and Pacific oceans as quite different geopolitical theatres. They have seen a case for really separating or delineating those two spaces, in particular for Sri Lanka, in focusing squarely on the Indian Ocean, so as not to import issues that are happening in the Pacific into our local space. Could you explain what you see as the commonalities between the two oceanic regions, which make clear that they should actually be viewed as a single strategic space?

Prof. Medcalf: There is obviously some truth to the idea that each region or subregion has its own distinct problems and solutions, and it is not as if every challenge in the Indian Ocean region is automatically present in the Pacific or in East Asia.

But if you flip it around, if you look at the presence and the role and the interests of East Asian countries in the Indian Ocean, that to my mind is one of the defining characteristics of the Indian Ocean's renaissance as a centre of gravity. If it wasn't for Chinese energy dependence on the sea lanes of the Indian Ocean; China's relations with Africa and the Middle East; the growing presence of the Chinese navy in the Indian Ocean and the concerns this raises in the minds of others including Japan and the United States - then we wouldn't have in a way the Indo-Pacific connections that we have now.

So I don't think the Indian Ocean can insulate itself from great power competition that may be primarily based around the rise of China in East Asia. So in that sense, it's not about quarantining or separating or trying to keep the big stakeholders out of the Indian Ocean. It's really instead about helping to provide context, and when I say "it" - I mean, a strategic imperative to the foreign policy of countries that are resident powers in the Indian Ocean, like Sri Lanka or Australia. Their imperative, I think, is more about setting the right context to manage great power competition in the Indian Ocean, and that's why, in my opinion, Sri Lanka would be well advised to begin to formulate its own Indo-Pacific policy, which could be a subset of its Indian Ocean policy or vice versa. I don't think you can have an effective Indian Ocean strategic policy without an Indo-Pacific dimension to it.

LKI: *That is an interesting way of looking at it; that in essence, you don't have to regard the two as competing or necessarily separate concepts - Indian Ocean or Indo-Pacific - but rather you could focus on one or the other but also have a related concept in the second. If you have an Indian Ocean vision, you could still also secondarily have an Indo-Pacific policy.*

You mentioned, obviously, the emerging concern about managing great power competition in the Indo-Pacific, in the Indian Ocean, and that leads me to the third question I have, which is about an emerging grouping to manage that strategic competition in the region.

The recent revival of the quadrilateral security meeting of Australia, India, Japan and the United States, known informally as the 'Quad,' is one such option that has emerged to manage this competition. It has generated quite a bit of interest in strategic and policy making circles.

However, it is also clear that this is an early stage endeavour, and that there are differences between the four nations, as indicated by the lack of a joint statement following the ministerial meeting in November 2017. What in your view are the key differences within the Quad, and how might these evolve?

Prof. Medcalf: So there's been a lot of mythology around the Quad, and it is always extraordinary to me that a meeting of four officials for perhaps 45 minutes or something like that on the sidelines of a regional forum, can arouse so much excitement, confusion, hope, and fear - depending how you want to put it and depending on who is expressing it.

So we should be a little bit more realistic about what the Quad is and isn't. It is at an early stage; it is a work in progress; and it is about four countries essentially sharing their strategic assessments, sharing notes about how to manage tensions in the region, and the opportunities. That's significantly about the rise of China, but it's not only about the rise of China. Remember that the first Quad in 2007 was essentially, again four officials in a room talking about disaster relief. There was also the Malabar Exercise, but that was technically a separate thing; so now that the Quad is back, and we have a Quad 2.0.

I think this time the Quad is here to stay; so what is it about? It is about those four countries that happen to be maritime powers, that happen to be democracies, that are not all US allies, but that all share anxieties about really what Chinese power means in the region. It's about them initially sharing notes, sharing assessments. It may eventually go to a different level where perhaps there's an operational component, perhaps some joint exercising or training or something. But just as likely, it could involve these four countries widening the conversation to a range of other countries.

So I don't think we need to get too excited about it at the moment. I also don't think it's very fruitful to be looking for the weak links in the Quad, because of course, at an operational level with the United States and two allies, Japan and Australia, there's going to be a qualitatively different level of military or intelligence engagement among those countries than there is with India. But in terms of strategic worldview and political will at the moment, I'd say it is pretty solid among all four, and even interestingly in Australia, I see it as becoming increasingly bipartisan between the government and the opposition, because frankly there has been quite a reality check in Australia on China in recent years. We still want a good economic relationship, but we are determined as an independent nation to ensure that our sovereignty is protected as well.

LKI: *That's a useful analysis. You mentioned the involvement of potentially other countries as the Quad evolves. Sri Lanka's tradition of non-alignment would make active involvement unlikely, but it's something to watch.*

I want to talk a bit about Australia's recently released White Paper on Foreign Policy, which stated that Australia should seek to strengthen the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). This is an organisation in which Sri Lanka has also shown a renewed interest, in line with its vision

to become a centre of the Indian Ocean; and Sri Lanka has recently been appointed as the Lead Coordinator of IORA's Working Group on Maritime Safety and Security. Does IORA present an opportunity for Sri Lanka and Australia to enhance their strategic cooperation within a multilateral institution; beyond the essentially bilateral cooperation we have seen so far, which has been focused on the issue of people smuggling?

Prof. Medcalf: Absolutely, and I think that although the people smuggling issue has been really important to Australia in the transnational security relationship with Sri Lanka - it's obviously a big political issue in Australia, among other things - we need to be much broader and more ambitious and holistic in the way we engage Sri Lanka as a security partner.

Now IORA has actually proven quite useful previously for the Australia-India relationship, the Australia-Indonesia relationship, and indeed the Australia-India-Indonesia relationship, which is beginning to be something of a trilateral relationship forming there. So when you start getting not necessarily large powers, but powers or nations that have very clear sense of purpose, working in mechanisms like IORA that often suffer from the disparate and diverse nature of its very large membership - not only can you get things done in that institution, but you can build trust and a track record of achievement for the small caucus of countries that work on those things.

I do think that Australia-Sri Lanka cooperation in IORA is a good aspiration, a good ambition. I also think that there are other things that we can be looking at; whether it's picking very specific issues on anything ranging from illegal fishing through to environmental management and monitoring, through to the best ways of engaging with major powers in the Indian Ocean. There are probably all sorts of bilateral conversations we could be having. We could be working together on issues related to capacity-building, and improving our internal organisational ability to take an integrated approach to foreign policy and national security problems. Australia takes a very 'whole-of-government' approach to foreign policy these days, as evinced in the White Paper, and we do a lot of training and development to support that.

But finally, going back to this Indo-Pacific lens, it would even be intriguing for Australia and Sri Lanka to perhaps, try and work more closely in forums like the ASEAN Regional Forum, where we are both members, and where there is potential for confidence-building measures and other activities in the wider Indo-Pacific region. So I do see a pretty promising relationship ahead, and I think Australia, through its White Paper, is embracing not only the Indo-Pacific concept, but also welcoming the activism of countries like Sri Lanka in really trying to anticipate a lot of challenges of the region. And we need to do this together in a very realistic way.

LKI: *It is interesting you mentioned other avenues for cooperation, including Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing and maritime crime. Sri Lanka perhaps would be especially well placed to engage on those issues. The UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) plans to move its global maritime program to Sri Lanka later this year, so that's also an interesting avenue.*

I would like to end on something that has been discussed in policy making circles here, and that's the possibility of a Code of Conduct for the Indian Ocean region. It's been raised in some major policy speeches. However, the drafting of such a code may face some challenges, including the diplomatic issues and the logistical challenges of convening the littoral states of the Indian Ocean region. What is your view on a possible Code of Conduct for the Indian Ocean, any alternatives, and how should a smaller state like Sri Lanka be approaching this?

Prof. Medcalf: Thanks; there's a lot in that question. I think the first point I'd make - and from an Australian perspective, I welcome the idea of Sri Lanka being more active in regional foreign and security policy - is the idea that we, the small and medium powers, need to find a way to mitigate the risks around great power competition in the Indo-Pacific. In my own view, much of that competition revolves around one particular country's assertiveness, but nonetheless, the risks from competition can affect us all.

I think I would need to know more about what this Code of Conduct idea entails. I am intrigued and interested to find out more about that, but I guess it's a work in progress. My note of caution from looking at the Southeast Asian examples that Australia is familiar with, is that we've talked a lot with ASEAN over the years and of course finding consensus among the ASEAN ten is an extraordinarily hard thing to do, let alone in a larger context.

Having identified what the challenge is, it may be that these are problems that can be addressed more through frankly encouraging the major powers to stick to the agreements they've already signed, such as UNCLOS. But if there is still a problem that needs to be addressed, my advice would be to think about ways to do it that doesn't require consensus-building among a large number of countries. Because that is one of the problems with the Indian Ocean and with the Indo-Pacific more generally, and that's not going to change. That is why I think approaches like the Quad and so called minilateral approaches, small numbers of countries taking a kind of self-selecting lead, sometimes has to be the way to begin, because it's a way of building agreement.

So I'd say, think about whether in fact what Sri Lanka is looking for is a document, or is it a process? If it's a process, then I think you've got more scope to be versatile, to be fluid, to adapt from year to year to the needs of the moment, and to not take on the burden of negotiating a consensus among countries that will have all sorts of disparate interests.

The final point I'd make is, it would be good, in my view, for Sri Lanka to be looking for role models in this regard, countries that have taken on similar challenges in the past. Now I'm not necessarily saying that Australia is the right fit there. But certainly, a country like Singapore, that has to deal with all of the sensitivities of ASEAN, but also, like Sri Lanka, really distinguishes itself as an economic and indeed a strategic hub in Southeast Asia. It may well be there are examples in Singapore's experience in dealing with piracy or other issues, where there could be some lessons learned as to how to make this approach. It may even be that this ends up being an initiative that Sri Lanka might undertake with the help of some of its middle-power friends such as Singapore, and indeed Australia.

LKI: *Those are wise words - to focus on the process rather than the document, in essence to focus on the issues to be solved. Thank you very much Prof. Medcalf. You've taken us through the nuances of the term 'Indo-Pacific', which is a concept that's often seen as large and amorphous; thank you for giving some clarity to that. Thank you also for your frank observations on the Quad and its early stage endeavours; on how Sri Lanka and Australia could cooperate in IORA, but also many other ways outside IORA; and how we might generally approach the issues that we're all facing in the Indian Ocean, drawing on the experiences of other states that have faced similar issues. Thank you and we look forward to continuing the conversation in other ways.*

Prof. Medcalf: It's been my pleasure. Thank you.

Further Reading

Medcalf, R. (2017), 'Goodbye Asia-Pacific. But Why the Sudden Buzz Over Indo-Pacific?,' *South China Morning Post*, accessed January 2018,
<http://www.scmp.com/week-asia/geopolitics/article/2126210/goodbye-asia-pacific-why-sudden-buzz-over-indo-pacific>

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