

The Indo-Pacific Vision in Strategic Limbo

A Foreign Policy Case Study for the Trump Era



Mira RAPP-HOOPER

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Executive Summary

Trump Administration's Indo-Pacific security strategy is a case study in foreign policymaking under a non-unitary executive. Having identified competition with China as a leading national security priority in its early months, disposed of the Obama Administration's Rebalance to Asia, and begun the process of defining its 'free and open Indo-Pacific' approach, the administration has made little subsequent progress towards developing it into a concrete strategy. While some modest efforts have been made to develop policy at the working level, the President himself has pursued a much narrower China approach, focused almost exclusively on punitive trade measures and North Korea. Moreover, the basic principles that motivate Indo-Pacific concept are clearly at odds with the President's own instincts. As a result, two largely independent streams of China policy have emerged and are highly unlikely to be rationalized in the next two years.

This current disjuncture does not, however doom the Indo-Pacific security strategy to history's dustbin. Whether or not the moniker persists, the basic contours of the approach are likely to be adopted by a new administration and are largely consistent with broader U.S. objectives in the region. Far beyond the White House, a consensus has emerged in Washington that the United States and China will be increasingly competitive, and that a holistic American strategy is necessary. Any future strategy is likely to rely on allies and partners, emphasize democracies, seek to secure the First Island Chain and maritime Asia, and have ample room for participation by European partners. There will, however, remain many hurdles to full and successful implementation, including perennial American over-optimism about regional states' alignment decisions and ability to commit resources, as well as the profound distrust that is likely to enshroud U.S. strategic leadership after Trump. Nonetheless, American allies and partners may think of the Indo-Pacific approach as one whose time is still likely to come; they should seek to develop it themselves until the United States is capable of resuming some form of regional leadership.

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Introduction

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This current disjuncture does not, however doom the Indo-Pacific security strategy to history's dustbin. Whether or not the moniker persists, the basic contours of the approach are likely to be adopted by a new administration and are largely consistent with broader U.S. objectives in the region. Far beyond the White House, a consensus has emerged in Washington that the United States and China will be increasingly competitive, and that a holistic American strategy is necessary. Any future strategy is likely to rely on allies and partners, emphasize democracies, seek to secure the First Island Chain and maritime Asia, and have ample room for participation by European partners. There will, however, remain many hurdles to full and successful implementation, including perennial American over-optimism about regional states' alignment decisions and ability to commit resources, as well as the profound distrust that is likely to enshroud U.S. strategic leadership after Trump. Nonetheless, American allies and partners may think of the Indo-Pacific approach as one whose time is still likely to come; they should seek to develop it themselves until the United States is capable of resuming some form of regional leadership.

Defining the Indo-Pacific Security Strategy

The Trump Administration's vision for a "free and open Indo-Pacific" shares some basic strategic similarities with its predecessor, the Pivot. Recognizing that China's rapid ascent would reshape the balance of power in the Pacific, the Obama Administration sought to reinforce American power and presence in the region. The Pivot or Rebalance sought to do so through a tripartite approach; this included military force posture improvements, strengthened diplomatic ties among existing allies and with new partners, and the promotion of trade and economic integration through the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP)¹. The Pivot was a promising vision for the future of U.S. strategy in Asia, although it was under-resourced and under-prioritized. This was particularly true after its key architects departed the Administration by 2012.

Within two months of taking office, the Trump Administration declared the Pivot dead—at least as a strategic bumper sticker.² Even before that announcement, the newly-inaugurated president had withdrawn the United States from TPP, guaranteeing that the United States would face headwinds as it sought to reassure regional states of its commitment to Asia. Senior foreign policy officials nonetheless realized that the United States needed a regional strategy that contained many of the same elements as the Rebalance. Secretary Mattis' early 2017 trip to the region was an obvious attempt to signal that many aspects of prior Asia strategies would stand.³

The phrase "Indo-Pacific Strategy," was first unveiled by Prime Minister-aspirant Shinzo Abe in 2006.⁴ In an early speech explaining the phrase, Abe envisioned a coalition of like-minded, pro-trade democratic partners who would cooperate to defend the "international order" in Asia as China rose. The coalition would center on the United States, Japan,

1. H. Clinton, "America's Pacific Century", *Foreign Policy*, November 11, 2011, <https://foreignpolicy.com>; K. M. Campbell, *The Pivot: The Future of American Statecraft in Asia*, New York: Twelve Books, 2016.

2. Foreign Press Center Briefing with Acting Assistant Secretary of State Susan Thornton, March 13, 2017, www.dvidshub.net; H. Suh, H. Krejsa, and M. Rapp-Hooper, "The Rebalance is Dead! Long Live the Rebalance!", *War on the Rocks*, March 16, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com>.

3. Y. Tatsumi, "Defense Secretary Mattis in Asia: Challenges for a 'Reassurer-in-Chief'", *The Diplomat*, February 3, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com>.

4. M. D. Swaine, "Creating an Unstable Asia: The 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' Strategy", *Foreign Affairs Online*, March 2, 2018, <http://carnegieendowment.org>.

Australia, and India. The “Indo-Pacific” geographic distinction was significant because it represented the merging of two major bodies of water, and a more expansive definition of Asia.⁵ American diplomats and defense officials had previously toyed with using the term “Indo-Pacific” to define the geographic scope of their interests in Asia, but generally stuck with “Asia-Pacific.” “Indo-Pacific” was not adopted as a formal element of American strategy until fall of 2017.

During their first year in office, senior Trump Asia officials worked alongside colleagues drafting the National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy to develop the contours of what could become the administration’s approach to Asia. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson first used the phrase “free and open Indo-Pacific” in an October 2017 speech. Tillerson’s remarks were almost entirely focused on India and its regional role, and he did not describe an American approach more fully. Tillerson’s speech was really a preview of the fact that Trump himself would use the term throughout his November trip to the region.⁶ The American president’s efforts to debut this new approach received mixed reception, however. This was not because the phrase itself was problematic, but rather, that as we shall see, some of its implied content appeared to contradict other central messages delivered during his tour. Shortly thereafter, the Indo-Pacific was given top regional billing in the National Security Strategy, and both the NSS and the National Defense Strategy identified China as a major power competitor and key national security concern.⁷

By the time these strategic documents were released, debate was well under way about what precisely the “free and open Indo-Pacific” concept included. Amongst this administration, definitions have varied somewhat, notably between Secretaries of State Tillerson and Pompeo. Some definitional interpretation is nonetheless possible. The “free” modifier refers to the fact that the United States opposes the use of coercion in the region, and also expresses a preference for democracy. “Open” suggests an accessible regional membership, but also implies open global commons, opposition to spheres of influence, and “fair and reciprocal” (not free) trade.⁸ Like its Japanese progenitors, the Trump Administration’s framework

5. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, “The Confluence of the Two Seas”, Speech at the Parliament of the Republic of India, August 22, 2007, www.mofa.go.jp.

6. P. Martin *et al.*, “Trump Discovers ‘Indo-Pacific’ on Asia Tour in Boost for India”, *Bloomberg*, November 13, 2017, www.bloomberg.com; L. Nelson, “In Asia, Trump Keeps Talking about the Indo-Pacific”, *Politico*, November 7, 2017, www.politico.com.

7. A. Ayers, “The U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy Needs More India”, *Council on Foreign Relations*, May 25, 2018, www.cfr.org.

8. M. R. Pompeo, Remarks on “America’s Indo-Pacific Economic Vision,” Indo-Pacific Business Forum, U.S. Chamber of Congress, July 30, 2018, www.state.gov; M. Lillehaugen, *Asia Dialogue*, June 22, 2018, <https://carnegieendowment.org>.

suggests a wider geographic scope than “Asia” or the “Asia-Pacific” region. The Indian and Pacific Oceans are considered as a single strategic theater for both economic and security purposes. The current instantiation frames the Indo-Pacific region as stretching all the way from the Indian Ocean to the west coast of the United States, and thereby seeks to ensconce both India and the U.S. as permanent regional players.⁹

Beyond these definitions, the American conception of the “free and open Indo-Pacific” concept remains rudimentary. Nonetheless, it is possible to comment on a few things this framework is *not*. The American vision is not entirely synonymous with Japan’s approach, which has largely been redefined to focus on regional connectivity and stability.¹⁰ It is also not synonymous with the Quad, shorthand for the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue that includes India, Australia, Japan, and the United States—a rather similar cast of characters. The Quad is a membership-based security forum, and one that is likely to remain controversial in China’s eyes, as Beijing fears it may become an alliance. An Indo-Pacific strategy, in contrast, is theoretically open to all. Particularly in the eyes of some members, notably India, an Indo-Pacific security framework is non-exclusive, while the Quad has a more restricted membership with specific objectives.¹¹ American officials may wish for an Indo-Pacific strategy to rely on the Quad, with the Quad increasingly taking on the qualities of an alliance, but the two have not converged and are not likely to in the eyes of many other regional players.

9. National Security Strategy of the United States, December 2017, www.whitehouse.gov.

10. “A New Foreign Policy Strategy: Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy,” Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, www.sydney.au.emb-japan.go.jp/; S. Akimoto, “How Japan Can Save the Indo-Pacific Strategy,” *Japan Times*, June 24, 2018, www.japantimes.co.jp.

11. L. Kuok, “Negotiating the Indo-Pacific Security Landscape,” *Brookings*, June 8, 2018, www.brookings.edu.

The Indo-Pacific in Strategic Limbo

Since its announcement in autumn 2017, the Indo-Pacific strategy has become a policy divided—and in some ways, suspended. Considered in terms of the U.S. defense budget and working-level initiatives, American strategy in Asia has been fairly stable, and has included some very modest signs of progress. Examined at the presidential level, however, the story is quite different: President Trump overshadowed the strategy's rollout with his own heterodox instincts, and his foreign policy priorities in Asia have only detracted from the basic underpinnings of the Indo-Pacific approach. The Indo-Pacific strategy seems to be an example of the two-track foreign policy that is quickly becoming the Trump Administration's hallmark—a breakdown of the unitary executive that occurs when the President's own priorities do not match those of the bureaucracy that serves him.¹² Brief examples of working-level sustainment and executive-level sabotage illustrate this point.¹³

The NSS, NDS, and initial announcement of the “free and open Indo-Pacific strategy” were not simply bureaucratic milestones: rather, they formed the initial foundations for a consistent strategic approach to Asia. By identifying China as a peer competitor and national security threat, and the region as of primary importance, the Administration defined a coherent set of priorities. From its inception, the embryonic strategy was notable in its lack of an economic agenda to replace TPP. Nonetheless, the portion of the U.S. defense budget devoted to the region has remained stable, and planned defense investments suggest that the Pentagon is truly prioritizing competition with China.¹⁴ The initial steps towards regional strategy were steady.

Following these framing documents, however, working level progress has been much more modest. In 2017, Pacific Command (PACOM) was renamed Indo-Pacific Command. This was a perfectly worthy move and reflects PACOM's longstanding area of responsibility. It does not, however, change anything about the way PACOM operates, or beget any material

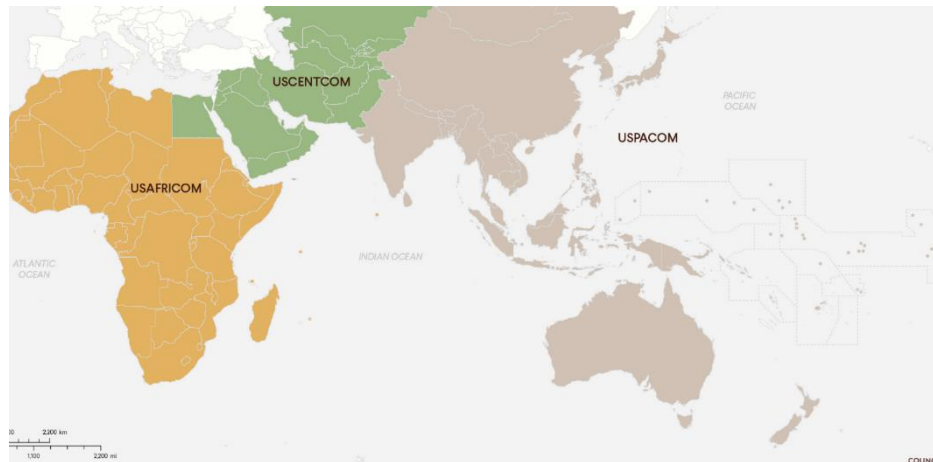
12. Anonymous, “I am Part of the Resistance Inside the Trump Administration,” *New York Times*, September 5, 2018, www.nytimes.com.

13. For a similar argument, see Z. Cooper, “A Tale of Two Asia Policies”, *War on the Rocks*, September 7, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com>.

14. Summary of the National Defense Strategy of the United States of America, “Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge,” Department of Defense, 2018; M. Karlin, “How to Read the National Defense Strategy,” *Brookings*, January 21, 2018, www.brookings.edu.

changes in resourcing or policy, and is therefore not strategically meaningful in and of itself.¹⁵

Figure 1: PACOM's Longstanding Area of Responsibility



Source: Council of Foreign Relations.

While the defense budget has remained stable, the resourcing of new regional initiatives has been paltry. In mid-2018, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced a new infrastructure and energy initiative totaling \$113 million dollars, which regional commenters quickly identified as underwhelming.¹⁶ Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi explicitly belittled the announcement.¹⁷ Even without Wang's mockery, the figure necessarily invited comparison to the \$400 billion China purports to be spending on BRI projects, and raises obvious questions about how the United States and its allies could possibly seek to make such modest efforts competitive.¹⁸ With no detailed "Indo-Pacific" framework, the small sum was left to speak for itself, and its message did not reverberate.

Furthermore, the Administration has failed to refurbish existing commitments from prior administrations that are natural fits for this strategy. The United States has pledged to spend \$150 million yearly on maritime capacity building in Southeast Asia, but this was the initiative of Secretary of Defense Ash Carter, and we do not know if the pledge will be

15. L. Kuok, "Negotiating the Indo-Pacific Security Landscape", *Brookings*, June 8, 2018, www.brookings.edu.

16. M. R. Pompeo, Remarks on "America's Indo-Pacific Economic Vision," Indo-Pacific Business Forum, U.S. Chamber of Congress, July 30, 2018, www.state.gov; J. Crabtree, "Trump Cannot Push Back on China with \$113 M", *Nikkei Asian Review*, July 31, 2018, <https://asia.nikkei.com>.

17. C. Yong, "US Announces US \$300 Million to Fund Security Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific Region", *Straits Times*, August 4, 2018, www.straitstimes.com.

18. "China Signs Deals Worth \$390 Billion With Belt and Road Countries", *The Economic Times*, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com>.

renewed.¹⁹ Furthermore, an Indo-Pacific strategy is an obvious framework through which U.S. security assistance efforts could be augmented. The United States still spends the overwhelming majority of its foreign military financing in the Middle East and should fund these programs more fully if the Indo-Pacific is indeed its top priority. Japan and Australia each spend more on capacity building efforts in absolute dollar amounts. An obvious next step would have been to create a coordination mechanism through which the United States and its regional partners could cooperate on, or at least deconflict, their capacity building efforts. No such initiative has been forthcoming. Beyond its initial foundations, therefore, the United States has managed to make relatively progress towards realizing a strategy.

More problematic, however, is the fact that the President himself systematically undermines any efforts towards strategy-building with his own foreign policy proclivities. Trump has a narrow view of U.S. economic and national security, holds long-dated antipathy for treaty allies, abhors free trade, has no demonstrated preference for democracy, and shows little regard for lofty concepts like the balance of power and the future of the international order.²⁰ Individually and certainly in sum, these instincts are inimical to the full implementation of a coherent strategy for Asia.

The President unveiled the framework on his November 2017 trip to the region, and while he used “Indo-Pacific” terminology throughout, his remarks felt heavily scripted. Nowhere was this more obvious than at the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum (APEC), where Trump used Indo-Pacific verbiage throughout a speech that delivered a dark, zero-sum message of economic protectionism.²¹ The threatening substance of the remarks appeared to be totally at odds with the “free” and “open” contours of the concept. Its meaning was far more memorable than its vocabulary, because the former was consistent with the President’s own beliefs, while the latter read as bureaucratic grafting. The undefined “Indo-Pacific” vision could not offset a grim and antagonistic message, and a terminologically aspirational rollout was eclipsed by the proclivities of its messenger.

In the year that followed, Trump has not reverted to this Indo-Pacific verbiage; instead he has pursued a narrow strategy for Asia that is consistent with his personal preferences and inimical to broader strategy. The White House has remained fixated on just two regional issues—diplomacy with

19. Congressional Budget Justification, Department of State, Foreign Operations, and related Programs, Fiscal Year 2019, www.state.gov.

20. R. Lissner and M. Rapp-Hooper, “The Day After Trump: American Strategy for a New International Order”, *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 41, No. 1, pp. 7-25.

21. Remarks by President Trump at APEC CEO Summit, Danang Vietnam, November 10, 2017, www.whitehouse.gov.

North Korea, and trade antagonism with China. Engagement with Pyongyang may be preferable to threats of war, but unilateral diplomacy has highlighted Trump's fascination with autocrats more than it has produced any progress on Pyongyang's nuclear and missile programs.²² The escalating trade war with China is potentially more problematic still, as it injects economic uncertainty throughout the region and underscores the United States' sharp turn towards protectionism, at a potentially-significant cost to itself and others.²³ Furthermore, the President has withdrawn himself from the 2018 regional summit season—a self-inflicted blow in a region that cares deeply about diplomacy. As much senior Asia officials may remain sincerely committed to the development of a strategy, they cannot overcome the incredibly narrow aperture of this President and the fact that the White House's policy choices reflect that scanty lens. Under such circumstances, no one can credibly reassure allies in Asia that the United States is committed to maintaining its longstanding obligations—or that a clearer strategy is forthcoming.

22. A. Panda and P. Parmeswaran, "What's Causing the Slow Breakdown of U.S. North Korea Talks?," *The Diplomat*, August 30, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com>; U. Friedman, "Inside the Dispute Derailing Talks with North Korea", *Atlantic*, August 29, 2018, www.theatlantic.com.

23. D. Dollar, "The Future of the U.S.-China Trade War," *Brookings*, July 9, 2018, www.brookings.edu; J. Hatzius *et al.*, "Trade War: An Update," Goldman Sachs, June 25, 2018.

An Idea Whose Time Will Come

The Rationale Behind an Enduring Indo-Pacific Strategy

The United States' Indo-Pacific strategy has evolved just enough to become a case study in the Trump Administration's two-track foreign policy—a paradigmatic example of the U.S. President and the foreign policy bureaucracy working at cross purposes. Given that President Trump's Asia policy preferences are the product of long-held instincts, this disjuncture is unlikely to be resolved in the next two years. Try as they might, senior Asia officials will continue to face executive headwinds as they try to transform the Indo-Pacific vision into a true strategy. Nonetheless, there are several reasons to believe that a new administration will pursue an approach to Asia that has many of the same contours—that the Indo-Pacific security strategy is an idea whose time will yet come, albeit in 2021 or thereafter.

The first reason to think that an Indo-Pacific strategy will still be realized is that there is a quickly-crystallizing consensus in Washington around the future of U.S.-China relations. The American foreign policy community does not approve of Trump's trade war, but experts are increasingly pessimistic about China's future, and the future of U.S.-China relations as Beijing continues to rise. For the last several years, American China watchers from both parties have undergone a "China reckoning," and have abandoned some of the fundamental assumptions that notionally guided the bilateral relationship for decades. The first assumption was that economic growth would make China more democratic, or at least more inclined to some forms of liberalization. The second was that if China was increasingly ensconced in international institutions and regimes, those forms of order would change China more than China changed it.²⁴

To some extent these assumptions were always heuristics—very few China experts truly believed that it would become a liberal democracy—but this "reckoning" has nonetheless left experts in a more pessimistic place. China-watchers generally feel that Beijing is becoming more, not less authoritarian, and that as it rises it intends to make international order more

24. See, e.g. K. M. Campbell and E. Ratner, "The China Reckoning: How Beijing Defied American Expectations", *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2018; A. L. Friedberg, "Competing with China", *Survival*, Vol. 60, No. 3, 2018, pp. 7-64.

friendly to its regime, likely at the expense of democratic values and principles.²⁵ They therefore increasingly believe that some amount of security and economic competition between the United States and China is highly likely, although they also acknowledge that some forms of cooperation will remain possible, particularly on global issues. Much remains to be defined about what U.S.-China competition actually means or what American objectives in that competition should be. This expert consensus, however, suggests that any new administration is likely to be staffed with Asia officials who appreciate the need for long-term, proactive U.S. strategy in the Pacific.

Second, and beyond the calcifying concordance in the China community, foreign policy experts more generally have begun to conceive of the future of international politics as a world characterized by competition between democracies and authoritarian states. Whether because of China's authoritarian consolidation, Russia's revanchism under Putin, or democratic backsliding around the world, the lines of foreign policy rivalry are increasingly being sketched by regime type.²⁶ This suggests that beyond the simple acknowledgement of need for a China strategy, any new administration will be most inclined to turn to democratic allies and partners as it devises its approach. When it does, it will almost certainly turn to the very same countries who theoretically form the core of this instantiation of the Indo-Pacific strategy.

Third, and relatedly, any American strategy for Asia will inevitably include a heavy reliance on allies and partners. As the Pivot or Rebalance did, American strategists understand full well that the regional balance of power depends on the continued health of its alliances. Its military position in the region is entirely dependent on its continued base access and defense cooperation and interoperability. Moreover, for several years, national security experts have acknowledged the imperative to encourage cooperation among American regional allies, not just between allies and the United States.²⁷ As China continues to rise, the United States and its allies

25. E. Economy, *The Third Revolution: Xi Jinping and the New Chinese State*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.

26. K. Magsamen, M. Bergmann, M. Fuchs, and T. Sutton, "Securing a Democratic World: The Case for A Democratic Values-Based Foreign Policy", Center for American Progress, September 5, 2018; T. Wright, "The Return to Great Power Rivalry was Inevitable", *The Atlantic*, September 12, 2018, www.theatlantic.com.

27. R. Fontaine, P. Cronin, M. Rapp-Hooper, and. H. Krejsa, "Networking Asian Security: An Integrated Approach to Order in the Pacific", *Center for a New American Security*, June 19, 2017, www.cnas.org; E. Ratner, P. Cronin, R. Fontaine, Z. Hosford, "The Emerging Asian Power Web: The Rise of Bilateral Intra-Asian Security Ties", June 10, 2013, www.cnas.org.

will need to do more from a position of relative, if not absolute decline.²⁸ This will require them to produce greater efficiencies from the relationships they already have—a promising prospect because allies like Australia and Japan are increasingly inclined to cooperate with one another on regional security. While most American allies prefer not to alienate China, many are nonetheless increasingly wary of how it may use its power in a quest for regional hegemony.²⁹ As the Indo-Pacific framework does, we should expect any future American strategy to focus on treaty allies and increasing cooperation among them in a “networked” fashion.

Fourth, the embryonic Indo-Pacific strategy gestures at longstanding American geostrategic interests in Asia—interests that are likely to remain constant in any future strategy. Long before it extended formal security guarantees in the region, American strategists identified the First Island Chain—the rim of major archipelagos stretching from the Kamchatka Peninsula to the Malay Peninsula—to be an important geographic line of defense. Once Washington had begun to form alliances in Asia, the First Island Chain was the barrier of primary focus. John Foster Dulles saw the chain as the United States primary line of defense in the region and encouraged alliances with the countries that comprised it. In contemporary Asia, the First Island Chain is newly at risk because of China’s anti-access/area denial capabilities, which raise questions about whether the United States will be able to protect its allies through direct defense. If the United States is going to remain a credible security guarantor in Asia, it will have to capitalize on the First Island Chain’s geographic advantages and secure its and its allies’ positions there. As China continues to rise, we can expect America to maintain a foothold in the First Island Chain and maritime Asia, which is the fulcrum of any strategy and is implied in the Indo-Pacific approach today.

Fifth, in addition to emphasizing longstanding treaty alliances, the Indo-Pacific approach calls on the United States to strengthen non-treaty partnerships with countries like India, Vietnam, and Indonesia. Much as any future strategy will have to rely on longstanding alliances, so too will it have to engage new partners, who may not be fully aligned with the United States in traditional terms. Despite their various forms of non-aligned foreign policies, India, Vietnam, and Indonesia are all rapidly growing economies in Asia, and other countries that will be increasingly wary of China’s use of power in the region. Like the Indo-Pacific approach, any developed strategy

28. “Networked Security in a Changing Asia: The Case for Alliances Under Uncertainty,” in: M. Heazle and A. O’Neil (eds.), *China’s Rise and Australia-US-Japan Relations*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2018.

29. “Mapping our Indo-Pacific Future: Rory Medcalf’s Speech,” Policy Forum and National Security College Talk, May 21, 2018, www.policyforum.net.

will have to find ways to increase quiet collaboration with these partners, while nonetheless realizing that they are unlikely to become full allies.

Sixth, and finally, any American strategy for the Pacific will have to be a multidimensional one, with economic, defense, and diplomatic components. If, as one suspects, this strategy continues to emphasize partnerships among democracies to secure stability and the balance of power in the region, this will permit natural synergies with European partners. American officials have for years been encouraging European allies to deepen their involvement in Asia. And while close allies, such as Britain and France, have made commitments to support freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, for example, their sheer geographic distance makes it hard for this to be more than symbolic.³⁰ A fully-developed, multidimensional strategy will, however, include infrastructure, development, cyber, trade, intelligence, and informational components, and it may be far easier for European allies to deepen their regional involvement on these issues.³¹ For example, a standing dialogue through which European and Asian allies could share information on best practices related to cyber and disinformation campaigns could be fruitful for all and could meaningfully increase European security contributions to the region despite their geographic expanse.

Hurdles and Challenges Ahead

Despite the fact that the Trump Administration's Indo-Pacific vision is likely to reflect many of the components of any future American strategy, there are also some obvious hurdles that such a strategy will have to overcome.

First, the United States is often overly-optimistic about its alignment prospects. Newer partners like India and Vietnam, for example, have shown some interest in *ad hoc*, lower profile cooperation, with Washington, but are not interested in being perceived as firmly aligned. The United States has eagerly been trying to expand its cooperation with India since the George W. Bush Administration, but progress on defense issues has been slow.³² In his 2018 speech at the Shangri-La dialogue, for example, Prime Minister Modi spoke favorably of the Indo-Pacific concept in broad terms, while emphasizing India's strategic autonomy, including its partnership with Russia. Moreover, many "emerging partners" on the maritime periphery of

30. T. F. Chan, "Need to Play by the Rules: UK and France will Challenge China in the South China Sea", *Business Insider*, June 4, 2018, www.businessinsider.com; T. A. Luc, "Are France and the U.K. Here to Stay in the South China Sea?", *The Diplomat*, September 14, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com>.

31. M. Lillehaugen, *Asia Dialogue*, June 22, 2018, <https://carnegieendowment.org>.

32. See, e.g., The National Security Strategy of the United States of America, 2002, which contains more references to India and strengthening ties with India than any subsequent document. www.state.gov.

the Indo-Pacific have long traditions of non-alignment, making it relatively unlikely that they will completely transform their national security orientation soon.

Relatedly, while the United States and its treaty allies often share top-line assessments of the challenges China poses, they may vary in their intensity of preference. Even those allies who believe strongly that their long-term security fates are enmeshed with Washington do not want to be forced to choose between the United States and China, particularly because long-term economic interdependence with the latter is all but certain. The Republic of Korea presents a particularly striking example, as the two major political parties have entirely distinct preferences for relations with China. As a result, Seoul may appear to tilt towards and away from Washington based on its domestic politics, and even this close treaty ally may have misgivings about its role in a strategy towards Beijing.³³ Precisely because its own hegemony in Asia is at stake, under most circumstances we would expect the United States to be relatively forward leaning in its efforts to harness regional states for such a strategy. It is likely to encounter various forms of China-related hesitation that manifest themselves in myriad ways.

Second, Washington is also prone to chronic over-optimism in its expectations of what existing treaty allies can reasonably accomplish. After years of coaxing its allies to spend more on defense (previously in fair ways, more recently through more coercive ones), top U.S. treaty allies in the region actually have increased their security spending, albeit modestly.³⁴ As is true for many European allies, most treaty allies in Asia are experiencing demographic headwinds and economic stagnation, and these trends are likely to persist for the foreseeable future.³⁵ The fastest growing economies in Asia are absolutely *not* American treaty partners, so Washington's expectations of allies must be informed by a clear-eyed understanding of their domestic and economic constraints.

Third, and well beyond its allies and partners, and the United States is likely to encounter considerable resistance from other regional players. Beijing has always been wary of "Indo-Pacific" nomenclature, as it appears to minimize China's importance, locks the United States into the region, and

33. S. A. Snyder and S. Park, "What Are South Korea's Strategic Options?", *East Asia Forum*, April 6, 2017; S. A. Snyder, *South Korea at a Crossroads: Autonomy and Alliance in an Era of Rival Powers*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2018.

34. K. Zeising, "Defense Budget 2018 at a Glance", *Australian Defence Magazine*, May 8, 2018, www.australiandefence.com.au; C. Prior and T. Le, "Looking Beyond One Percent: Japan's Security Expenditures", *The Diplomat*, April 3, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com>; "South Korea Has 7% Increase in Defense Budget for 2018 with \$40.5 Billion", *Army Recognition*, January 4, 2018, www.armyrecognition.com.

35. B. Guerin *et al.*, "A Growing and Ageing Population: Global Societal Trends to 2030, Thematic Report 1", Santa Monica: RAND, 2015.

presages India's ascent.³⁶ Chinese officials recently maligned the concept, calling it an idea that will "dissipate like ocean foam." ASEAN has also eyed the framework warily, as it generally prefers to avoid strong security alignment with the United States. Unless the strategy is developed to include a clear economic component in which ASEAN states can play a role, their enthusiasm may remain muted.³⁷ As it has demonstrated many times in recent years, Beijing has grown skilled in playing conditions of hesitant alignment to its advantage: after all, it will be much harder for the United States and its allies to assemble and maintain a stable coalition to support a long-term Indo-Pacific strategy than it will be for China to try to spoil it.

Fourth, even if a new U.S. president takes office in 2021, the Trump Administration will have left something of a strategic vacuum in Asia for four years, and China will have moved to fit some of this space. Although its BRI vision originated long before Trump was elected, Beijing has made significant progress in promoting its infrastructure vision as well as in advancing specific projects in the United States' absence. Washington would never have had the resources to compete with BRI everywhere, but its foreign policy disarray will likely prevent the United States from mounting even an asymmetric development and infrastructure strategy. China also will have advanced its model of internet governance and begun to export significant technologies to other states in the region in the intervening time, and the United States will be left scrambling to catch up on these areas of competition. More broadly, America's strategic disarray will have given China a period of four years in which it has managed to look like the "adult" in the region, which serves its longer-term interest in reestablishing regional hegemony.³⁸

Fifth and finally, between the end of the Rebalance and the beginning of a new American administration, global trust in the United States will have plummeted, raising longer-term questions about Washington's ability to serve as a dependable fulcrum for future strategy. Even if a completely mainstream president occupies the White House, the United States will always be the nation that elected Trump, and responsible for the damage he has and will yet cause. In just his first year in office, global public opinion of the United States and its president plummeted, and the decline was the

36. R. Medcalf, "The Indo-Pacific: What's in a Name?", *The American Interest*, www.the-american-interest.com.

37. L. Kuok, "Negotiating the Indo-Pacific Security Landscape", *Brookings*, June 8, 2018, www.brookings.edu.

38. M. Rapp-Hooper, "What China Wants from Trump", *Foreign Affairs*, November 7, 2017, www.foreignaffairs.com.

sharpest among American allies in Europe and Asia.³⁹ Yet polling of Americans suggest that the public remains broadly supportive of a constructive U.S. role in the world, and of a foreign policy based on alliances, multilateral institution, and cooperative leadership.⁴⁰ To add a third layer of polling complication, publics in Asia are deeply wary of China's growing power: they see its military might as dangerous, have mixed views of its economic power, and increasingly see its rise as negative for the region.⁴¹ Taken together, these data suggest that major regional partners will remain eager for a China-facing strategy, and that the American public is likely to support constructive reengagement in the region. Regional states will need to make their own calculations about Washington's strategic reliability after Trump leaves office.

39. R. Wike *et al.*, "U.S. Image Suffers as Publics Around the World Question Trump's Leadership, Pew Research Center, June 26, 2017, www.pewglobal.org.

40. D. Smeltz *et al.*, "What Americans Think about America First: Results of the 2017 Chicago Council Survey of American Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy", Chicago Council on Global Affairs, p. 10.

41. L. Silver, "How People in the Asia-Pacific View China", Pew Research, October 16, 2017, www.pewresearch.org.

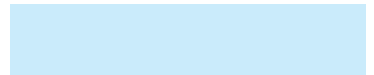
Conclusion – Onward for Allies

While the obvious strategic fissure between Trump and his bureaucracy is likely to prevent the maturation of any Indo-Pacific strategy over the next two years, American allies should take note that many of its most basic underlying principles are likely to be sustained. From its object of securing the region as China rises, to its emphasis on democratic allies and partners, to its strategic focus on the maritime domain and the First Island Chain, and its potential to include European allies, these anchoring principles should be stable.

Since Trump's election, and even before it, substantial strategic initiative in the region has come from American allies—whether Japan's selective engagement with the Belt and Road Initiative, Japan and Australia's maritime capacity building efforts, or Tokyo's and Canberra's efforts to keep TPP alive.⁴² These allies are not and should not wait for Washington to be a strategic first mover. They should continue to contribute to strategy they see as in their long-term national security interests, developing new areas of cooperation that are likely to become increasingly salient. These include developing asymmetric approaches to China's geo-economic initiatives, as Japan has begun, continuing their work on TPP, and engaging in more regular coordination on issues relating to cyber space and disinformation. In these efforts, they should increasingly involve European allies where possible.

Without the United States leading the strategic charge, an Indo-Pacific approach will necessarily lack the resources and political heft it should have. But for allies, proceeding is still a dominant strategy. If, as this author hopes and expects, the United States returns to a more recognizable foreign policy in two years' time, allied efforts will have helped to set the direction for subsequent strategy and will have prevented a yawning strategic vacuum from emerging in Asia in Washington's virtual absence. If, instead, U.S. domestic politics remains volatile, and Washington struggles to maintain a consistent and recognizable strategy for Asia, allies will have begun to take the steps towards the more independent foreign policies that represent their long-term interest.

42. "Japan and Australia Vow to Put TPP into Effect Soon", May 22, 2018, www.japantimes.co.jp; R. Jennings, "Japan in Committed to China's Belt and Road Initiative, but What's In It for Them?", *Forbes*, April 17, 2018, www.forbes.com.



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