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# The Indo-Pacific in US Strategy: Responding to Power Shifts

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## Abstract

This article's purpose is fourfold. It starts with insights from theory in the shape of “power transition” theory and “balance of threat” theory. The empirical focus is a three-fold consideration of US presence, rhetoric and diplomacy concerning the Indo-Pacific. The section on “presence” pursues the US position as a resident and sovereign power across the Pacific Ocean with particular mention of the role of Guam, together with further basing facilities across into the Indian Ocean, alongside the role of the US Indo-Pacific Command (IPCOM). The section on “rhetoric” moves from the official discourse of the Obama administration initiated by Hillary Clinton, and advocacy of an Indo-Pacific Economic Corridor (IPEC), into the vigorous re-affirmation of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) by the Trump administration in late 2017 and through 2018. The section on “diplomacy” considers US bilateral, trilateral and quadrilateral diplomacy with Australia, India, Japan and France that operate in both oceans. The article demonstrates that a key feature of US Indo-Pacific strategy is using one rising power (India) to help constrain another rising power (China).

## Keywords

Balance of Power, Indo-Pacific, Strategy, Australia, Japan, United States

## Introduction

In the 1950s–1970s the dominant regional narrative in United States (US) strategic thinking was the Pacific as an “American Lake” (Lattimore 1945). *Manifest Destiny* having carried the US westwards across the American continent, had moved on from California across the Pacific in two phases. First, US power rolled out to Hawaii and Guam (and the Philippines) at the end of the 1890s. Second, victory in the Pacific War of 1941–1945 against Japan resulted in US control of the Carolines and Marianas and indeed ongoing bases in Japan itself, which established the US as the Pacific hegemon. In the 1980s the dominant narrative

in US strategic thinking was the so-called “Asia-Pacific” (Cummings 1997), in which the economic dynamism of the Pacific Rim and related talk of the “Pacific Century” knitted together California, Japan and the *Asian Tigers* of South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore. The formation of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) mechanism reflected this perspective.

However the dominance of this Asia-Pacific strategic narrative in US strategic thinking is now weakening. The “Indo-Pacific” emerged circa 2010 as a regional framework for US strategic discourse under the Obama administration, and became a key regional term for official US discourse by 2017 under the Trump administration. There are two reasons for this recent shift in strategic language, one is geo-economic and the other is geopolitical. The geo-economic shift is to do with the general volume of trade, including particularly significant energy flows between the Indian and Pacific oceans. The geopolitical shift is to do with the rise of China, and also India in the region. The US has been the leading power in the Pacific since 1945 and a prominent power in the Indian Ocean since the 1980s. Now the US, Japan and Australia are faced with Chinese assertiveness in the Western Pacific; while in the Indian Ocean the US and another key rising power, India are faced with an increasing Chinese presence. Not surprisingly, in the face of this Chinese challenge, the US has crafted an Indo-Pacific response.

This article now considers US Indo-Pacific strategy, in reality driven by China-fears, in four sections dealing with insights from theory, presence (actorness), rhetoric (official discourse) and diplomacy in play by the US.

### **Insights from Theory**

This article is not a theory application, but is primarily an empirically based exercise in Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA). Just over a decade ago, John Mearsheimer (2006, p. 160) argued that “to predict the future in Asia, one needs a theory of international politics that explains how rising great powers are likely to act and how the other states in the system will react to them”. The US Indo-Pacific strategy reflects three processes which follow from each other. First is that China’s rise presents “power transition” challenge to the US. Second is that the US is responding to that challenge by pursuing “balancing”, both in terms of building up its own strength (“internal balancing”) and in strengthening its alliances and strategic partnerships (“external balancing”). Third is that in balancing terms “balance of threat” considerations are in operation not only for the US but also for Japan, Australia and India vis-à-vis China. In this light two related international relations theories are particularly relevant, and are what Mearsheimer had in mind; namely “power transition” theory and “balance of threat” theory.

The first theory deals with “fundamental shifts in world power – power transi-

tion” (Lemke and Tammen 2001, p. 14). Power transition theory argues that an established hegemon brings hegemonic stability but is then faced with a challenge from a new rising rival. Before a new hegemon takes over there is a period of instability where the risk of war is at its height, where the established hegemon, feeling threatened may still try to take down its rival while it still has the strength. It is no surprise that at the start of the century Lemke and Tammen (2001, p. 7) considered that “today only China represents a potential challenger to the United States”. This perception was clearly reflected in the *Quadrennial Defense Review* conducted by the Pentagon in 2006, which pinpointed China’s as the main peer competitor challenging the US:

*Of the major and emerging powers, China has the greatest potential to compete militarily with the United States and field disruptive military technologies that could over time offset traditional U.S. military advantages absent U.S. counter strategy. (US 2006, p. 29)*

The “counter-strategy” is US building up of its own military strength (“internal balancing”) and seeking allies and partners (“external balancing”) across the Indo-Pacific.

However, China is not the only significant rising power, there is India similarly pursuing an economics-driven rise in the international system. Faced with the two rising powers China and India, the then Secretary of State Rex Tillerson made an important distinction:

*China, while rising alongside India, has done so less responsibly, at times undermining the international, rules-based order [...] It makes perfect sense that the United States – at this time – should seek to build on the strong foundation of our years of cooperation with India. It is indeed time to double down on a democratic partner that is still rising – and rising responsibly – for the next 100 years [...] The Indo-Pacific in particular – needs the United States and India to have a strong partnership. (Tillerson 2017)*

Elsewhere in the State Department this focus on India is apparent; “our Indo-Pacific strategy, as well as our National Security Strategy [...] all recognize one salient fact: the importance of India’s emergence as a rising global leader. We welcome India’s rise” (Vajda 2018). The reason that the US welcomes India’s rise is that it provides increasingly important balancing counterweight to China’s rise.

A complement to “power transition theory” is the “balance of threat” theory put forward by Stephen Walt (1985). This is a refinement of the “balance of power” (*structural realism*) theory put forward by Kenneth Waltz (2010), which argued that a leading power will automatically face balancing coalitions against it by relatively weaker powers. Under Waltz’s logic Japan and India would be balancing

with China against the United States. However, they have gone the other way – balancing with the US against China, within their own hedging strategies. Why? The answer is simple. Walt put forward four criteria for a country making “threat” calculations about another country. In addition to Waltz’s aggregate power and military power considerations, Walt put forward (perceived) offensive intentions and geographical proximity as two further categories (Walt 1985, pp. 9–11). It is these two additional categories of perceived offensive intentions and geographic proximity that make India and Japan (and other regional actors) more concerned about Chinese power than about US power. The result is that US Indo-Pacific strategy can and does utilise the threat perceptions across the region concerning China. This was what John Mearsheimer (*offensive realism*) alluded to when he wrote that the application of balancing theory would mean that “most of Beijing’s neighbors [...] will join with the United States to contain Chinese power” (Mearsheimer 2014). This is the strategic logic of the US Indo-Pacific strategy, formal alliances (Cronin 2017) and implicit strategic partnerships to constrain China.

### **Presence (Actorness)**

The US is a well-established Indo-Pacific actor. Washington argues that it is part of the region, not an outsider.

*As an Indo-Pacific nation ourselves [...] when we speak about the Indo-Pacific region, we are defining it as stretching from the US West Coast through the Bay of Bengal [...] From a security standpoint, the Indo-Pacific is the region in which the United States has our longest maritime border, several long-standing treaty allies, as well as being home to our Pacific fleet. (Rosenblum 2018)*

This combination of assets was why the State Department emphasized that “the United States is and will continue to be an Indo-Pacific power” (Wells 2017). The US status as a *resident power* is through territorial possessions across the Pacific as well as bases in the Indian Ocean.

In and across the Pacific, the US is a *sovereign power* of the first order. Firstly with regard to its eastern littoral, California, Oregon, Washington and Alaska (including the Aleutian chain) swing around much of the eastern rim of the Pacific. San Diego is the resident homeport of the US Pacific Fleet; consisting of over 50 ships, including permanent aircraft carrier basing, and over 20,000 personnel.

Secondly, of particular significance was Hawaii’s incorporation into the US in 1898, becoming a fully fledged state in 1959, and housing the US Pacific Command (PACOM), which was appropriately enough renamed as the US Indo-Pacific Command (IPCOM) in May 2018. Naval leaders have considered that “Hawaii remains the gateway to the Indo-Pacific” (Harris 2018a). In the southern

Pacific, Samoa became US territory in 1899, complete with naval facilities.

Thirdly, in the Western Pacific, in the wake of the Spanish-US war of 1898, Guam became a US possession, and remains so to the present day. Within the pivot/rebalance from the Atlantic to the Pacific announced by the Obama administration, Guam's significance has been raised by the decision to build it up as the US "tip of the spear" and the receptacle of military reinforcements redeployed from South Korea and Japan, as well as "forward deployment" from the eastern sectors of the Pacific (Crisostomo 2013; Erickson and Mikolay 2014). Guam sits in the "second island chain" which runs from Japan's Bonin Island holdings, through the Marianas (including US military facilities at Tinian) to Guam. Deep water facilities able to handle aircraft carriers are complemented with the long airstrip at Andersen airbase, able to house heavy strategic B-52 bombers. Guam is the site of the biennial large-scale *Valiant Shield* exercises, held by the US military since 2006. Guam is also the home for the *Cope North* air force exercises, run between the US and Japanese air forces since 1999, but now expanded to include the Australian air force since 2012. Finally, Guam was the host site in June 2018 for the trilateral *Malabar* exercises between the US, India and Japan, complete with the presence of the USS Ronald Reagan, the lead US nuclear powered aircraft carrier.

Fourthly, the US presence is also found along the so-called "first island chain" running from Japan (complete with US Carrier Strike Group Five based at Yokusaka) and its Ryukyu chain of islands (including the US 3rd Marine Expeditionary Force based at Okinawa), through Taiwan to the Philippines. A striking feature is Taiwan's re-emergence in US strategic thinking as a checkpoint on China (PRC) that must be maintained. Taiwan has been singled out again as a significant partner for the US; "the United States, Taiwan, and all our partners can work together to strengthen the free and open order of the Indo-Pacific" (Wong 2018a).

Fifthly, US deployments into the South China Sea have increased in strength and frequency, with deliberate Freedom of Navigation (FON) exercises carried out within 12-miles of China's artificial islands. US basing facilities at Palawan in the Philippines facing the South China Sea were re-established in 2016. In turn de facto berthing facilities have been established at Da Nang amid growing US-Vietnam cooperation. The USS Carl Vinson carrier strike group made a particularly significant historic visit to Da Nang in March 2018, a powerful force with a powerful message for Beijing. It was deliberate that Secretary of Defense James Mattis' visits to Vietnam and Indonesia in January 2018 were depicted by the US military as "Indo-Pacific" in nature (PACOM 2018). With regard to Indonesia, another significant rising power, a "strategic partnership" was declared in 2015. The *Cope West* exercises between the Indonesian and US air forces have run annually since 2012, at times in Indonesia and at other times at Tinian in the Western Pacific. In welcoming the Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi

to Washington in March 2018, Indonesia was described by Mattis (2018a) as “a geographic and diplomatic fulcrum for the Indo-Pacific region”, in which the US expressed support for Indonesian claims to the waters surrounding the Natuna Archipelago, waters in some dispute with China.

Sixthly, defence links with Singapore established under the 2005 Strategic Framework Agreement and further strengthened under 2015 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement have resulted in an ongoing Logistic Group West Pacific stationed there by the US. Special aircraft carrier berthing facilities, ongoing deployment of littoral combat warships and regular aircraft deployments at Singapore enable further US projection into the Eastern Indian Ocean and South China Sea. In this vein the US-Singapore Strategic Security Policy Dialogue meeting on April 2018 stressed their “mutual defense cooperation” focussing on “maritime security” in the region so as to “uphold a free and open Indo-Pacific” (US 2018c). Similar Indo-Pacific projection is enabled with the Marine Rotational Force agreed with Australia at Darwin in November 2011. In turn, the UK atoll of Diego Garcia has been the site of a significant US base since 1977, embedding US maritime power in the middle of the Indian Ocean, and “anchoring America’s future presence in the Indo-Pacific” (Erickson, Ladwig and Mikolay 2013).

With regard to regional architecture, the US is a member of various organizations which include members from both the Pacific and Indian Oceans; most notably the East Asia Summit (EAS), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM). The US is also a member of the Asia-Pacific Fishery Commission (APFC), which was originally and accurately termed the Indo-Pacific Fisheries Council/Commission from 1948–1993 given that its membership included India. In addition, the US is a member of various Pacific Ocean bodies by virtue of its “sovereign” power status. These include the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) mechanism, and the West Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS).

One particularly important actor is the US military in the form of the US Indo-Pacific Command (IPCOM) based at Hawaii. Its area of responsibility stretches from San Diego to Diego Garcia, from the Pacific to the Eastern Indian Ocean (68 degrees east), including India. Previously called the Pacific Command (PACOM), the decision by Defense Secretary Mattis on 31 May 2018 reflected geographic and geopolitical reality, that “in recognition of the increasing connectivity of the Indian and Pacific Oceans today we rename the US Pacific Command to US Indo-Pacific Command” (Mattis 2018c). The *Rimpac* exercises organised by the US at Hawaii, represent Indo-Pacific naval diplomacy (Tran 2018), involving as they do an increasing range of Pacific Rim countries since 1971 but also India since 2012. In contrast, China though finally invited in 2014 and 2016 was dis-

invited to the 2018 exercises on account of its actions in the South China Sea. Admiral Aquilino argued that “RIMPAC is not only the world’s largest international maritime exercise, it also shows that like-minded nations who value a free and open Indo-Pacific want this opportunity to improve our cooperation with each other” (US Navy 2018).

This “Indo-Pacific” scope had been explicitly recognized by PACOM leaders since 2012. This was first shown when the then PACOM Commander, Admiral Samuel Locklear, invoked the “Indo-Pacific” nineteen times in one particular extended speech on “American commitment to the Indo-Pacific” (Locklear 2012). He emphasized two themes. Firstly with regard to US strength (*internal balancing*):

*We will put our most capable forces forward in the Indo-Pacific... Through the tumultuous years of the last century, America’s military served as a key stabilizing factor in the Indo-Pacific security environment—this will continue. (Locklear 2012)*

Secondly, he drew out bilateral relationships with Indo-Pacific allies and partners (*external balancing*):

*Our alliance with Australia [and Japan] will continue to underpin U.S. security objectives in the Indo-Pacific for decades to come. We are also developing and expanding our bilateral partnerships with nations throughout the Indo-Pacific with whom we have shared security interests. Nations such as Indonesia [are] a critical partner to a successful rebalance to the Indo-Pacific. And we will pursue a long-term partnership with India. (Locklear 2012)*

Although, the term “Indo-Asia-Pacific” became the standard term used at PACOM during 2013–2017 for its deployments, defence partnerships and general strategic encapsulations entwining the Pacific and Indian Oceans, the term “Indo-Pacific” was then re-adopted in 2018. Consequently, in his last testimony to the US Senate Armed Forces Committee, PACOM’s commander Admiral Harry Harris repeated that “the U.S. has an enduring national interest in the Indo-Pacific”, but was faced with challenges from Beijing, “China’s ongoing military build-up, advancement, and modernization are core elements of their strategy to supplant the United States [...] in the Indo-Pacific” (Harris 2018b). His answer was to highlight “allies and partners join us in addressing these global challenges to defend freedom, deter war, and maintain the rules which underwrite a free and open Indo-Pacific” (Harris 2018b).

Finally his successor Admiral Phillip Davidson, the incoming commander of the newly renamed Indo-Pacific Command, naturally enough stressed the Indo-Pacific firepower of the US to “continue to provide the combat power needed

to defend freedom, deter war, and maintain the rules which underwrite a free and open Indo-Pacific region”, thereby “maintaining favorable balances of power” since “for more than 60 years, the Indo-Pacific has been largely peaceful, in many ways made possible by the rules-based security architecture that our armed forces helped create, sustain, and preserve” (Davidson 2018). The reference to “balances of power” was with reference to China’s disruption of that power equilibrium which was a challenge to US paramountcy in the region, with the US following balancing tactics of building up its military power (“internal balancing”) and strengthening alliances and strategic partnerships (“external balancing”).

### **Rhetoric (Official Discourse)**

The first official use of Indo-Pacific rhetoric by the US can be seen during Barack Obama’s first administration, where Secretary of State Hillary Clinton argued that “the Indo-Pacific region is crucial to our future” (Clinton 2012). Strategic rethinking around Indo-Pacific regional conceptualization generated practical imperatives in Clinton’s mind; to “translate the growing connection between the Indian and Pacific oceans into an operational concept” (Clinton 2011). Alliance dynamics were a tacit part of her utilization of Indo-Pacific formulations. She first used the term “Indo-Pacific” in 2010 to reflect closer naval cooperation with India; “we are expanding our work with the Indian navy in the Pacific, because we understand how important the Indo-Pacific basin is” (Clinton 2010). Whereas US relations with Australia had previously been described and conducted within an “Asia-Pacific” framework, Clinton extended this with “Indo-Pacific” references; “we are also expanding our alliance with Australia from a Pacific partnership to an Indo-Pacific one” (Clinton 2011).

Indo-Pacific talk at the Department of State was matched by similar talk at the Department of Defense. The Defense Secretary, Chuck Hagel, was ready to invoke Indo-Pacific frameworks, like Clinton with regard to India; “our interests across the full span of the Indo-Pacific region are aligning more closely than ever” with “shared interest in maritime security across the region, including at the global crossroads of the South China Sea” (Hagel 2014a). Still wider frameworks were emerging for US defence policy; “at today’s AUSMIN [Australia-United States Ministerial Consultation meetings] having just come from New Delhi and having consulted closely with our Japanese and Korean allies and ASEAN defense ministers, I see a new, committed resolve to work together, to work together to build a security system across this Indo-Pacific region” (Hagel 2014b).

The then US ambassador to India, Nancy Powell, welcomed Obama’s re-election in 2012 as maintaining an Indo-Pacific drive:

*The continuing recognition in the United States of the importance of the Indo-*



*Pacific region is certainly a very very important part and part of the continuity in a second Obama administration [...] Certainly the Obama administration's rebalancing of our military forces and our defense policy towards the Indo-Pacific region is another thing that will continue under this administration. (Powell 2012)*

Admittedly with Hillary Clinton's departure, the Middle East and the terrorist group ISIS had more prominence under John Kerry, the subsequent Secretary of State. Nevertheless Kerry did invoke "the modern and dynamic Indo-Pacific region" where "the United States is already providing leadership on maritime security [...] in association with close friends and allies across the [Indo-Pacific] region, including India, Australia, Indonesia, and Japan" (Kerry 2015a). China's absence from such a listing of friends is no surprise. Kerry's take on the first ministerial meeting of the US-India-Japan (USIJ) trilateral held in September 2015 was that the meeting reflected "our interest in the Indo-Pacific region" and "an opportunity here to talk a little bit about the maritime security issues" (Kerry 2015b).

Extended Indo-Pacific underpinnings were given in a joint piece by Kerry and Penny Pritzker, the Secretary of Commerce. Common attitudes between the US and India were alluded to; whereby "both recognize that peace, prosperity, and stability in the Indo-Pacific region can only be secured by connected economies, freedom of navigation and overflight, and a rules-based architecture where maritime and territorial disputes are settled amicably" (Kerry and Pritzker 2015). The point about freedom of navigation and overflight, and maritime disputes was aimed at Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea. Military convergence, in part generated by this Chinese assertiveness, was further pointed out by them. The specific example given by them was the Malabar exercise between the US, India and Japan in the Western Pacific in 2014 and the Indian Ocean in 2015, thereby demonstrating how "our navies are partnering to promote maritime security across the Indo-Pacific region" (Kerry and Pritzker 2015).

Alongside the Obama administration's espousal of a political and military pivot/rebalance to the Western Pacific and Southeast Asia was the Indo-Pacific Economic Corridor (IPEC) initiative, aimed at "shaping the future of trade and connectivity in the Indo-Pacific" (Sumar 2014; also Biswal 2016). It was made with explicit reference to links between South Asia and Southeast Asia, did not involve China, and was implicitly a countermeasure to China's espousal of a Maritime Silk Road (MSR) that Xi Jinping made in autumn 2013. In addition, US aid was earmarked for IPEC schemes, and Obama adopted the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a multilateral trade framework with US allies and partners around the Pacific Rim which did not involve China.

US involvement in the TPP proved short lived as Donald Trump, upon inauguration in January 2017, took the immediate decision to pull the US out of the TPP. This reflected Trump's distrust of multilateral and state-led overseas economic initiatives. However after months of little clear foreign policy formulation, a very much explicit Indo-Pacific direction has emerged.

Trump's approach to the Indo-Pacific has been to avoid multilateral initiatives. Instead, the Trump administration has pursued security in bilateral and minilateral (trilaterals and quadrilaterals) settings and pushed private sector economic initiatives amid budget cuts in aid. This particular type of Indo-Pacific rhetoric in the Trump administration first became noticeable in late 2017 and early 2018. Indeed, Secretary of Defense James Mattis, having spent the previous part of 2017 talking of the "Asia-Pacific" and the "Pacific", used the "Indo-Pacific" term for the first time in September 2017:

*A peaceful and prosperous future in the Indo-Pacific region is based on a strong rules-based international order and a shared commitment to international law, to peaceful resolution of disputes and respect for territorial integrity. U.S.-India defense cooperation has steadily expanded in recent years, underpinned by a strategic convergence between our two countries based on common objectives and goals in the region. (Mattis 2017)*

The linkage to India was significant, the venue being his joint Press Conference with India's Minister of Defence Nirmala Sitharaman, carried out in Mattis' trip to India. Mattis made a point that "we value India's leadership across the Indo-Pacific" (Mattis 2017), and pointed to the trilateral *Malabar* exercises between India, Japan and the US as illustrating this strategic convergence. Whereas his warning about Chinese activities in the South China Sea were couched in specific "Asia-Pacific" frameworks at the Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2017, similar warnings about China were couched in equally specific "Indo-Pacific" frameworks at the Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2018 (Mattis 2018d).

An extended Indo-Pacific frame of reference was deployed in Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's speech to the Centre for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, which included 18 separate mentions of the "Indo-Pacific". He argued that "the world's center of gravity is shifting to the heart of the Indo-Pacific", and that "the Indo-Pacific – including the entire Indian Ocean, the Western Pacific, and the nations that surround them – will be the most consequential part of the globe in the 21st century" (Tillerson 2017). In an implicit aim at China, Tillerson emphasized that the US sought "a free and open Indo-Pacific". Bilateral partnership was highlighted where "the U.S. and India – with our shared goals of peace, security, freedom of navigation, and a free and open architecture – must serve as the eastern and western beacons of the Indo-Pacific" (Tillerson 2017).

Bilateral cooperation was also again entwined with trilateral cooperation with Japan, with the 2017 *Malabar* naval exercise given as “a clear example of the combined strength of the three Indo-Pacific democracies” (Tillerson 2017).

This embrace of the Indo-Pacific was signalled at the highest level during President Trump’s visit to Pacific Asia in November 2017. The highlight of the visit was his remarks in Vietnam. These included comments about “our vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific”, his reaching out to “friends, partners, and allies in the Indo-Pacific”, and in a criticism of China, stressing “we must uphold principles that have benefited all of us, like respect for the rule of law, individual rights, and freedom of navigation and overflight, including open shipping lanes” (Trump 2017). The “Indo-Pacific” was referred to ten times and the “Asia-Pacific” no times, despite this being an Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit. Not surprisingly, Chinese comments were negative about this US embrace of “Indo-Pacific” strategy formulations (Fang 2017).

The *National Security Strategy of the United States*, released in December 2017 contained a specific section on “The Indo-Pacific”. It warned that “geopolitical competition between free and repressive visions of world order is taking place in the Indo-Pacific region, which stretches from the west coast of India to the western shores of the United States” (US 2017a, pp. 45–46), in which “China seeks to displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region” (p. 25), but for which “the United States must marshal the will and capabilities to compete and prevent unfavourable shifts in the Indo-Pacific” (p. 45). The *National Security Strategy* argued that this was to be achieved through forward deployment of US forces complemented by quadrilateral arrangements with Australia, India and Japan, together with other bilateral arrangements with countries like Indonesia, Singapore and Vietnam.

Similarly, the 2018 *National Defense Strategy* released in January 2018 was damning in regards to China:

*China is leveraging military modernization, influence operations, and predatory economics to coerce neighboring countries to reorder the Indo-Pacific region to their advantage. As China continues its economic and military ascendance, asserting power through an all-of-nation long-term strategy, it will continue to pursue a military modernization program that seeks Indo-Pacific regional hegemony in the near-term and displacement of the United States. (US 2018, pp. 1–2)*

Its remedy against this “strategic competitor” was a mixture of US forward positioning, continuing robust Freedom of Navigation (FON) exercises in the South China Sea and strengthening security ties with like-minded China-concerned

nations. It was revealing that whereas the *National Security Strategy* mentioned the “Indo-Pacific” eleven times as a point of strategic reference, the “Asia-Pacific” was unmentioned save for one passing reference to the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) mechanism.

A synthesis of US administration thinking on the Indo-Pacific was provided by Alex Wong, Deputy Assistant Secretary in the East Asian and Pacific Affairs Bureau at the State Department, who made a substantive speech titled *The Indo-Pacific Strategy* in April 2018. He made a point of emphasizing “the main focus of my time right now is the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy” (Wong 2018b). In his explanation of the strategy he focused on its two aspects of “free” and “open”, and the particular relevance of the term “Indo-Pacific”.

In regards to the qualifier “free”, Wong used it at both the international and national levels:

*First of all, the international plane. We want the nations of the Indo-Pacific to be free from coercion, that they can pursue in a sovereign manner the paths they choose in the region. Secondly, we mean at the national level, we want the societies of the various Indo-Pacific countries to become progressively more free – free in terms of good governance, in terms of fundamental rights, in terms of transparency and anti-corruption. (Wong 2018b)*

This was an implicit challenge to China’s coercive assertion in the South China Sea, and indeed to its domestic policies in terms of human rights.

With regards to the qualifier “open”, Wong pinpointed four applications, in the shape of open sea lanes, open logistics-infrastructure, open investments, and open trade. References to open trade and open investment were meant as a criticism of the Chinese internal market. With regard to logistics-infrastructure:

*There’s an infrastructure gap throughout the Indo-Pacific. What is needed throughout the region to encourage greater regional integration, encourage greater economic growth? We want to assist the region in doing infrastructure in the right way, infrastructure that truly does drive integration and raises the GDPs of the constituent economies, not weigh them down. (Wong, 2018b)*

Again this was a criticism of China’s Maritime Silk Road (MSR) initiative saddling participants like Sri Lanka with debts to China. However, within this qualifier of “open”, Wong prioritized open sea lines of communication and open airways:

*By open, we first and foremost mean open sea lines of communication and open airways. These open sea lines of communication are truly the lifeblood of the re-*

*gion. And if you look at world trade, with 50 percent of trade going through the Indo-Pacific along the sea routes, particularly through the South China Sea, open sea lanes and open airways in the Indo-Pacific are increasingly vital and important to the world. (Wong, 2018b)*

This again was an implied criticism of Chinese assertiveness in the sea lines and airways of the East China Sea and particularly of the South China Sea.

The final significance of his outline was the way Wong explained the relevance of the term “Indo-Pacific”.

*Turn your attention to the term “Indo-Pacific.” It’s significant that we use this term. Before, people used the term Asia Pacific [...] but we’ve adopted this phrase for two reasons, and it’s significant for two reasons. Number one, it acknowledges the [...] current-day reality that South Asia, and in particular India, plays a key role in the Pacific and in East Asia and in Southeast Asia. [...] Secondly, it is in our interest, the US interest, as well as the interests of the region, that India play an increasingly weighty role in the region. India is a nation that is invested in a free and open order. It is a democracy. It is a nation that can bookend and anchor the free and open order in the Indo-Pacific region, and it’s our policy to ensure that India does play that role. (Wong, 2018b)*

In effect the “Indo” part of the “Indo-Pacific” pointed for Wong not just geographically to the Indian Ocean, but also and more importantly geopolitically to India. India was therefore identified as a player across the Indo-Pacific that the US sought to actively work with; India and the US are to form the two bookends (India in the west and the US in the east) of the regional order. Implicit balancing undertones are present with this fellow democracy, with China the non-democracy seen as the main challenge to that Free and Open Indo-Pacific order.

In such an official vein, the bipartisan *Asia Reassurance Initiative Bill* (ARIA) introduced in the Senate in April 2018, opened with the declaration that it sought “to develop a long-term strategic vision and a comprehensive, multifaceted, and principled United States policy for the Indo-Pacific region”. Within the Bill, the “Indo-Pacific” was mentioned 56 times, “Asia” five times and the “Asia-Pacific” three times. Bilateral, trilateral and quadrilateral links with India, Australia and Japan were given specific Indo-Pacific underpinnings in the text. It also recommended further joint maritime and Freedom of Navigation (FON) exercises in the South China Sea (section 112), amid a programme of “countering China’s influence” (section 101) in the region. Spending of \$1.5 billion during 2019–2023 was explained as being not only “to bolster the United States military presence and readiness in the Indo-Pacific region”, but also “to advance United States foreign policy interests and objectives in the Indo-Pacific region in recognition of

the value of diplomatic initiatives” (section 1010). Additionally, the bipartisan *National Defense Authorization Act* (NDAA) for 2019, passed by the House of Representatives in May 2018 commits funds for an Indo-Pacific Maritime Security Initiative (IPMSI), to include India. China, perhaps unsurprisingly, noted this with palpable concern (Xinhua 2018).

A final twist on US thinking was provided at the Indo-Pacific Business Forum hosted by the US Chamber of Commerce in July 2018. This included the presence of officials from the US (Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross and Energy Secretary Rick Perry), as well as officials from Japan, Australia, Singapore, India and Indonesia. At the Forum, Pompeo (2018) gave the keynote speech entitled *America's Indo-Pacific Economic Vision*. The unstated message was that this would provide a US alternative to China's MSR initiative.

## Diplomacy

At the start of 2018, the State Department Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs stressed the importance of “strengthening U.S. partnerships in the Indo-Pacific” (Thornton 2018). US diplomacy has long operated a network of bilateral alliances across the Pacific, most importantly with Japan and Australia. These bilateral alliances reflected Cold War concerns about the Soviet Union but have been strengthened still further with the rise of China. Such traditional Pacific alliances have been complemented by more recent security partnerships established further eastwards with Vietnam, Singapore, Indonesia, and most significantly India. The China-related need for *constraintment* was evident in the US Defense Department, with the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asian and Pacific Security Affairs' admission that “for this administration's vision for a free and Indo-Pacific to be realised we also have to deal with the rising challenges presented by China”, where “the Chinese Communist Party's vision for a new security architecture in Asia with China at the center is in many ways at odds with our own aspirations for the region” (Schriver 2017).

With regard to Japan, strong bilateral military cooperation continues to be strengthened in the Ryukyu chain and around Guam in the West Pacific. It is significant that Trump's specific adoption of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific framework in autumn 2017 followed on from Japan's initiation of the concept in 2016. Their common focus remains on China's growing presence across the Indo-Pacific. Hence, Mattis' welcome to the Japanese Foreign Minister at the Pentagon in April 2018 was aimed at China; “together, we stand for a free and open Indo-Pacific region, reinforced by the international rule of law. And we oppose the use of predatory economics by those seeking to impose their will on others in the region” (Mattis 2018b). The reference to “rule of law” was an implicit criticism of China's rejection of the June 2016 United Nations Convention on the Law of

Sea (UNCLOS) tribunal ruling on the South China Sea, while the reference to “predatory economics” was an implicit criticism of China’s MSR initiative.

Traditional security links with Australia have also been strengthened. The most obvious sign was the agreement for the deployment of US marines to Darwin in November 2011, with deployment potential into the Western Pacific, South China Sea and Eastern Indian Ocean. *Talisman Saber* has been a well established biennial military exercise between the two militaries, the 2017 one involving 33,000 US and Australian troops aboard varied battleships. Since 2011, the annual AUSMIN meetings between US Secretaries of State and Defence Secretaries with their Australian counterparts have made a point of considering the Indian Ocean as well as the traditional focus on the Pacific, and have included repeated concerns raised over Chinese actions in the South China Sea. An Indo-Pacific orientation has become explicit since 2017, with AUSMIN pledges “to increase bilateral collaboration in relation to the Indo-Pacific” (US-Australia 2017). The 2018 summit between Donald Trump and then-Prime Minister of Australia Malcolm Turnbull cast the relationship in suitable Indo-Pacific anchoring:

*Across the Indo-Pacific, our two nations are committed to deepening our engagement with our allies and all partners [...] A free, open, and prosperous rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific region is in both our nations’ enduring national interests. (US-Australia 2018)*

The key word was “across” the Indo-Pacific, i.e. cooperation with Australia not only in the Pacific but also in the Indian Ocean. It was also significant that other “allies and partners” in the Indo-Pacific were noted, in other words Japan as an ally and India as a partner. The AUSMIN Joint Declaration of 24 July 2018 was particularly extensive in its numerous “Indo-Pacific” references.

The significant shift from Pacific to Indo-Pacific security arrangements being made by the US are primarily focussed around India. The New Framework for Defense Cooperation (NFDC) established in 2005, and strengthened further in 2015, has been followed by increasingly significant naval and air force bilateral exercises in both the Indian and Pacific Oceans between the two countries, which are strategic partners if not formal allies. Their Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA), signed in August 2016 further opens the way for mutual use of each other’s bases in both oceans. Specific regional underpinnings were apparent in the drawn up in January 2015 between Obama and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi (US-India 2015). Joint common concerns have been expressed by US and Indian officials over maintaining freedom of navigation and airspaces in the South China Sea, and for UNCLOS tribunal findings to be upheld – both of which are comments aimed at China. As has already been seen, officials from the Obama (for example Clinton, Hagel, Kerry, and Pritzker)

and Trump (for example, Tillerson, Mattis and Wong) administrations, as well as naval leaders (for example Locklear and Harris) all made a point of repeatedly invoking shared “Indo-Pacific” interests in their analysis of US relations with India.

The Joint Statement drawn up between Trump and Modi in June 2017 defined their two countries as “democratic stalwarts of the Indo-Pacific” ready to cooperate together as “responsible stewards of the India-Pacific” (US-India 2017), which is an implicit criticism of an undemocratic China as being “irresponsible” in the South China Sea. Typical of ongoing US priorities with India was the latest Maritime Security Dialogue held in April-May 2018, which “discussed developments in the maritime domain of the Indo-Pacific” (US 2018d); with the maritime domain being where the US is faced with a growing Chinese maritime push in the Western Pacific, and where India is faced with a growing Chinese maritime push in the Indian Ocean.

At the bilateral level, US cooperation with France has also developed an Indo-Pacific character. This is facilitated by France being a resident sovereign power in both the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Naval exercises have been held between the US and French navies in both oceans. In December 2015 the French frigate *Provence* was embedded in the Carrier Strike Group headed by USN *Truman* in the Arabian Sea, before sailing further eastwards across the Indian Ocean. The then PACOM chief Admiral, Harry Harris was enthusiastic about these widening links in February 2018:

*France has significant equities in the Indo-Pacific, and I welcome France's growing involvement in the region [...] France aims to become more involved across the Indo-Pacific [...] I am very excited about France's increased willingness to stand by the U.S. as we confront revisionist state [i.e. China] and non-state actors across the region. (Harris 2018b, pp. 39–40)*

He gave as an example the current deployment of the French frigate *Vendémiaire* in the East and China Sea, operating there with the US Pacific Fleet, to China's unease. This US-French bilateral cooperation also led to trilateral exercises between the US, French and Japanese navies in the Western Pacific in May 2017.

The strategic trilateral arrangement between the US, Australia and Japan is particularly well-established (Shearer 2017). This was initiated in 2002, and was then upgraded to ministerial status from 2006, with an extra Security and Defense Cooperation Forum (SDCF) added in 2007. Their trilateral military cooperation has included naval exercises in the South China Sea in 2011 and 2016, submarine exercises in the Sea of Japan in 2017, and the *Cope North* air force exercises at Guam from 2012 onwards. The US Pacific Air Forces which hosts the *Cope North* event considered that the purpose of the 2018 trilateral exercise was clear;



“the annual exercise serves as a keystone event to promote stability and security throughout the Indo-Pacific” (PAF 2018). Typical of the shared concerns of the trilateral was the US Secretary of Defense Mattis’ discussions with his Australian and Japanese counterparts in 2017, which highlighted their “strong opposition to coercion” posed by Chinese militarization in the South China Sea”, and where they “reaffirmed the importance of further increasing cooperation among countries with shared interests in the peace and stability of the Indo-Asia-Pacific region, including India” (US 2017a). A significant development was their agreement in August 2018, which “underscored their commitment to working together to maintain and promote a free, open, prosperous and inclusive Indo-Pacific region”, recorded their “serious concerns” over Chinese actions in the South China Sea, and announced that the United States Overseas Private Investment Corporation working with the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Japanese Bank for International Cooperation on “significant infrastructure investment needs in the Indo-Pacific” (US 2018b).

The US trilateral with India and Japan, initiated in 2011 and upgraded to ministerial level in 2015, has adopted explicit Indo-Pacific reference points (Berkshire-Miller 2017). The then US ambassador to India considered that “by establishing a permanent US-India-Japan ministerial mechanism, we have institutionalised a conversation among the three pillars of the Indo-Pacific community of democracies” (Verma 2015). Their meeting in April 2018, “agreed to remain engaged and strengthen cooperation in support of a free, open, prosperous, peaceful, and inclusive Indo-Pacific region” (US 2018b). The security side of this format has been initiated with Japan permanently joining the annual US-India *Malabar* exercises in 2015, which alternate between the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean. An important geo-economic spin-off from this US-India-Japan trilateral was reflected in 2018 when they “agreed to continue to collaborate to promote increased connectivity in the Indo-Pacific” (US 2018b), as an overt alternative to China’s MSR initiative. This followed a successful Trilateral Infrastructure Working Group (TIWG) meeting in Washington in February 2018, with an announced readiness of the US Overseas Private Investment Corporation to provide grants, loans and insurance to help local companies tackle various infrastructure projects linking South Asia and Southeast Asia. They agreed to share information on their current Indo-Pacific projects with their trilateral counterparts, with joint loans and joint ventures also up for consideration.

In the light of these bilateral and trilateral links, the strategic logic was straightforward: renewal of the Quadrilateral format between the US, Australia, India and Japan. This had first surfaced in 2007 but had been halted following Chinese criticisms and subsequent Australian and Indian hesitations. A decade later, US officials met their quadrilateral counterparts in November 2017 for *Consultations*

*on the Indo-Pacific:*

*To discuss their shared vision for increased prosperity and security in a free and open Indo-Pacific region. The officials examined ways to achieve common goals and address common challenges in the region, such as: upholding the rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific, including freedom of navigation and overflight, respect for international law, and the peaceful resolution of disputes; increasing connectivity consistent with international law and standards [...] and maritime security efforts in the Indo-Pacific [...] The quadrilateral partners committed to deepening cooperation, which rests on a foundation of shared democratic values and principles, and to continue discussions to further strengthen the rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific region. (US 2017b)*

China was not mentioned but it was China's maritime assertiveness - especially in the South China Sea but also elsewhere in the Indo-Pacific as well as its MSR initiative - that was in mind with the re-formation of the Quad.

## **Conclusion**

Admiral John Aquinilo, on taking up command of the US Pacific Fleet in May 2018, warned his audience that "great-power competition has re-emerged as the central challenge to security and prosperity. Nowhere are the stakes of that great-power competition higher than here in the Indo-Pacific" (Aquinilo 2018). The US "unipolar moment" (Krauthammer 1990–1991) in the post-Cold War 1990s decade is now giving way to multipolarity, with several centres of power in which China and India are new factors. What is clear is that US Indo-Pacific policy involves co-opting one rising power (India) to help restrain another rising power (China), at a time when both the US, and indeed Japan, are facing relative power decline in the Indo-Pacific vis-à-vis China.

The financial commitment of the US is still subject to commentary. Mike Pompeo may have announced in July 2018 that the US would "allocate \$113 million dollars in immediate new funds to expand economic engagement in the Indo-Pacific" (Pompeo 2018a), but that was still tiny compared to the billions of dollars being poured into its MSR initiative. He may also have announced in August 2018 that "as part of our commitment to advancing regional security in the Indo-Pacific, the United States is excited to announce nearly \$300 million in new funding to reinforce security cooperation throughout the entire region" (Pompeo 2018b), but the sums were still relatively modest compared to Chinese spending. "Geoeconomics on a shoestring" (Panda 2018) was one immediate comment on it, and the response in Southeast Asia to the US Indo-Pacific economic initiative remained reserved.

Nevertheless, the military-strategic impact of the US Indo-Pacific strategy has

been fairly successful, particularly with its bilateral, trilateral and indeed quadri-lateral arrangements that have emerged. The US military positioning in the Indo-Pacific, for example the continued build up of Darwin and Guam, has also given a sharper US presence in both the western Pacific and eastern Indian Oceans. The US has also maintained a greater forward presence in the South China Sea. The way that China continues to denounce this US Indo-Pacific strategy (Global Times 2018a, 2018b) indicates that as a China constraint process the US strategy is proving reasonably effective in the geopolitical-security area.

## Bio

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