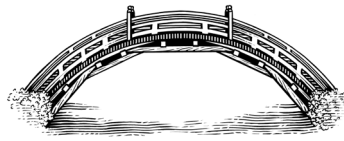


ROUNDTABLE

A Free and Open Indo-Pacific:  
Strengths, Weaknesses, and Opportunities for Engagement



*Joanne Wallis*

*Sujan R. Chinoy*

*Natalie Sambhi*

*Jeffrey Reeves*

## Introduction

*Jeffrey Reeves and Joanne Wallis*

In 2007, Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe proposed that if Japan and India were to come together, it would coalesce a “broader Asia” that would be “open and transparent” and “allow people, goods, capital, and knowledge to flow freely.”<sup>1</sup> Abe’s speech marked the emergence on the international stage of the idea that the Indian and Pacific Oceans are linked in a strategic arc, and that this region should be free and open. Abe’s commitment to this idea solidified during his second term in office (2012–14), culminating in his launching of Japan’s “free and open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP) strategy in 2016, with the goals of “freedom, the rule of law, and the market economy, free from force or coercion, and making it prosperous.”<sup>2</sup>

Since then, Japan has successfully promoted its FOIP concept. In 2017, U.S. president Donald Trump explicitly adopted FOIP language, stating that “I’ve had the honor of sharing our vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific—a place where sovereign and independent nations, with diverse cultures and many different dreams, can all prosper side-by-side, and thrive in freedom and in peace.”<sup>3</sup> However, while the FOIP concept exists as a strategy in Japan and the United States, in India and Australia it is primarily treated as a normative framing, and in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as an “outlook.”<sup>4</sup> Pacific Island states have been the most wary about adopting a

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**JEFFREY REEVES** is Vice-President of Research for the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada (Canada). He previously was the Director of Asian Studies at the U.S. Army War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. He can be reached at <jeff.reeves@asiapacific.ca>.

**JOANNE WALLIS** is Professor of International Security in the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Adelaide (Australia). She was formerly with the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre in the College of Asia and the Pacific at the Australian National University. She can be reached at <joanne.wallis@adelaide.edu.au>.

<sup>1</sup> Shinzo Abe “Confluence of the Two Seas” (speech at the Parliament of the Republic of India, New Delhi, August 22, 2007) ~ <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/speech-2.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Shinzo Abe (address at the Opening Session of the Sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development, Nairobi, August 27, 2016) ~ [https://www.mofa.go.jp/afr/af2/page4e\\_000496.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/afr/af2/page4e_000496.html).

<sup>3</sup> Donald J. Trump (remarks at the APEC CEO Summit, Washington, D.C., November 10, 2017) ~ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-apec-ceo-summit-da-nang-vietnam>.

<sup>4</sup> ASEAN, “ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific,” June 23, 2019 ~ <https://asean.org/asean-outlook-indo-pacific>.

FOIP concept.<sup>5</sup> Like the Southeast Asian states, they are concerned that the Indo-Pacific framing implies that smaller states will inevitably have to make a strategic choice “between a ‘China alternative’ and our traditional partners.”<sup>6</sup>

That the definition of the FOIP concept remains open to interpretation is a potential strength because states can adapt the concept to their circumstances. But this is also its greatest weakness because this elasticity means that the concept may be incapable of shaping a future regional security order. Moreover, that certain versions—particularly the one articulated by the Trump administration—clearly define China as an adversary makes the concept unattractive to many smaller, risk-averse states worried about exacerbating China’s strategic vulnerability.

With the FOIP concept still under development, in January 2020 the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada hosted a conference in Vancouver at which speakers from Australia, Canada, China, India, Indonesia, Japan, and the United States outlined their respective views on the Indo-Pacific idea. This roundtable is a joint project of the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada and the College of Asia and the Pacific at the Australian National University. Both institutions featured participants at the conference and belong to the *Asia Policy* consortium. This roundtable features a selection of essays on the FOIP idea, some presented at the conference and some drafted in retrospect.

These essays, and other contributions at the conference, reveal that while interpretations of the FOIP concept differ, each country shares an understanding that interconnectivity—whether economic, security, political, or people-to-people—is key. Therefore, in its most fundamental form, the FOIP concept is about realizing a two-ocean, two-continent strategy to build an inclusive mega-region. As the concept can also be read as code for containing China, particularly given that the main proponents of the concept—Australia, Japan, India, and the United States—have recently revived the Quad format, this suggests that it is important to emphasize interconnectivity and inclusivity as key principles of any aspirational FOIP vision in order to advance economic development and promote interregional engagement and stability.

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<sup>5</sup> Meg Taylor (keynote address to the 2018 State of the Pacific Conference, Canberra, September 8, 2018)  $\approx$  <https://www.forumsec.org/keynote-address-by-secretary-general-meg-taylor-to-the-2018-state-of-the-pacific-conference>.

<sup>6</sup> Meg Taylor, “The China Alternative: Changing Regional Order in the Pacific Islands” (keynote address at the Pacific Islands Forum, Port Vila, February 8, 2019)  $\approx$  <https://www.forumsec.org/keynote-address-by-dame-meg-taylor-secretary-general-the-china-alternative-changing-regional-order-in-the-pacific-islands>.

Participants at the conference acknowledged questions over what role “values” should play in the concept, given that this may challenge its attractiveness as a region-wide organizing principle. For example, while the Quad members have emphasized the importance of democracy, not all Asian states see shared democratic values or a democratically aligned rules-based order as necessary preconditions for state relations. There is also no consensus on what constitutes a rules-based order in Asia, as well as on which states established the existing order, which states are outside of it, and whether this order was a result of consultation and negotiation or imposed by dominant powers at a time when other powers (China, in particular) were too weak to resist.

Conference participants further discussed whether the FOIP concept could be operationalized as an organizing principle for a regional economic order. The tremendous economic diversity—in terms of size, development levels, per capita GDP, standards of living, and approaches to government and market relations—in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East challenges interregional economic integration. It is also unclear whether the United States and China would agree to be included in FOIP-directed economic integration, further complicating the concept’s ability to drive such a process. There are questions about whether the concept is necessary for Asian economic interconnectivity, which has deepened in recent years even absent any FOIP construct or institution. The existing regional economic architecture already includes the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, the Belt and Road Initiative, and numerous free trade deals, and many countries are negotiating the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership.

Participants also considered whether the FOIP concept could help coalesce a regional security order. Diversity is again a challenge, with the security interests and situations of regional states varying according to, among other things, their size and geographic location. Many security concerns also arise from tensions between regional states, such as issues around sovereignty in the South China Sea and, broadly, the preservation of open sea lines of communication. Participants concluded that cooperation on comparatively less controversial and more universally relevant nontraditional security issues, such as piracy, terrorism, environmental security, and illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, could be a valuable first step toward consolidating security cooperation among states under the FOIP concept.

This *Asia Policy* roundtable opens with Joanne Wallis outlining Australia’s Indo-Pacific vision, which is predicated on the country’s

geographic identity as a Pacific and Indian Ocean power. Compounding this vision is what Wallis describes as Australia's concern over geostrategic competition within the Indo-Pacific's maritime domain, particularly with respect to U.S.-China competition. She further links Australia's Indo-Pacific vision to the country's role as an Asian middle power, arguing that the concept gives Canberra more room for strategic maneuver and ultimately strengthens Asia's rules-based order.

In his essay on India's approach to a free and open Indo-Pacific, Ambassador Sujan R. Chinoy describes New Delhi's contemporary understanding of the geographic region in line with its key foreign and economic policies. He notes, for instance, how the Modi government is using the Indo-Pacific to realize its Act East Policy, to advance a vision of common economic development in South Asia, and to ensure strategic alignment with the United States, in particular. Like Wallis, Ambassador Chinoy points to India's geographic location astride the Indian and Pacific Oceans as having a specific determining quality for the country's vision.

Writing on Indonesia, Natalie Sambhi traces the genesis of its Indo-Pacific vision back to the country's historical view of its strategic place within the Asian maritime realm and identifies the contemporary domestic drivers and national security priorities. Sambhi highlights that Indonesia's view of the Indo-Pacific is unique among the proponent states in that Jakarta prioritizes inclusivity, nonalignment, and ASEAN centrality in its version of the concept. She further points to the Joko Widodo administration's concern over the U.S.-led FOIP vision, arguing that Indonesia is intent on not participating in any attempt to isolate China in the Asian region.

The roundtable concludes with a dissenting view about the free and open Indo-Pacific's strategic value for Canada from Jeffrey Reeves. In contrast to those advocating for FOIP alignment or an Indo-Pacific redesign, Reeves argues that Canada's adoption of an Indo-Pacific geographic construct over an Asia-Pacific one would ultimately limit the country's strategic options. He specifically points to the Trump administration's conceptual capture of the FOIP concept to focus almost exclusively on containing China as a source of strategic "baggage" that Canada would do better to avoid.

Collectively, the four essays in the roundtable provide important insight into regional perspectives—both positive and negative—on the Indo-Pacific's geostrategic relevance and the FOIP concept's strategic scope. This is not to suggest, however, that the essays represent or agree with a FOIP "consensus"—indeed, far from it. As with any new concept, disagreement exists as to the concept's effect on Asia's regional order,

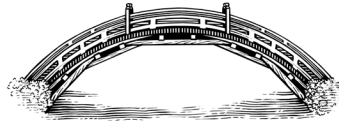
underlying strategic principles, and scope for organizing state relations. This roundtable, together with the January 2020 conference, is an attempt to identify such differences of opinion, as well as areas of common agreement, to engage more critically with the FOIP concept so as to map its operational and conceptual boundaries. As with all nascent ideas—which the free and open Indo-Pacific remains—the place of this concept in the Indo-Pacific order will become clearer with time. It is our hope that these essays make a modest contribution to such collective knowledge. ◆

ROUNDTABLE ESSAY

# Is It Time for Australia to Adopt a “Free and Open” Middle-Power Foreign Policy?

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*Joanne Wallis*



**JOANNE WALLIS** is Professor of International Security in the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Adelaide (Australia). She was formerly with the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre in the College of Asia and the Pacific at the Australian National University. She can be reached at <[joanne.wallis@adelaide.edu.au](mailto:joanne.wallis@adelaide.edu.au)>.

**KEYWORDS:** AUSTRALIA; PACIFIC ISLANDS; U.S.-CHINA COMPETITION; FREE AND OPEN INDO-PACIFIC; RULES-BASED ORDER; MIDDLE POWER

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This essay examines Australia's understanding of the concepts of the "Indo-Pacific" and "rules-based order" and analyzes how Australia pursues its geostrategic interests in the Indo-Pacific, particularly its increased emphasis on unilateralism.

### MAIN ARGUMENT

Australia and other regional countries confront the threat that U.S.-China tension could escalate from competition to outright confrontation. To address this challenge, Australia should adopt a more "free and open" strategic and foreign policy by partnering with other middle powers and smaller states to create a new Indo-Pacific security order that seeks to rebalance regional power dynamics. This security order would be better guided by rules than by values, but given the limitations of the existing rules-based order, Australia should recognize problems with the current rules and work to make them attractive to smaller states. This may involve middle powers compromising some of their "shared values" and making sacrifices to their national interests (narrowly defined) in service of the overriding interest in preserving regional peace and security based on rules that are seen as legitimate and respect-worthy by many states, not just the most powerful ones.

### POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Behind closed doors, middle powers are questioning whether the U.S. should continue to take the lead in securing order in the Indo-Pacific, and in fact do not necessarily trust that it is capable of doing so. Many Indo-Pacific states are wary of being caught between an activist China and an unpredictable U.S. and are reluctant to make a strategic choice.
- Over the last two decades, Australia has demonstrated its capacity as a middle power by leading interventions in Timor-Leste and the Solomon Islands, and most recently by implementing its cross-government policy to "step up" its engagement in the Pacific Islands. Australia should draw confidence from these and other efforts.
- Creating an Indo-Pacific security order negotiated and led by middle powers and small states will strain alliance relationships and strategic partnerships, and it will be challenged by Southeast Asian states' emphasis on ASEAN centrality and the preference of regional states for nonalignment and autonomy. This suggests that creating this order will require sustained diplomatic commitment and compromise and necessarily be an iterative process.



Australia, as a two-ocean continent, has declared itself “an Indo-Pacific nation” and, since 2013, has officially framed its zone of strategic interest as the region “connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans through Southeast Asia.”<sup>1</sup> For Australia, the Indo-Pacific is primarily a maritime concept, and one that emphasizes freedom of navigation along sea lines of communication that are crucial for the country’s highly open economy. The ocean is also the domain in which an adversary would need to operate to project power against Australia.

This essay examines Australia’s position as a middle power in the Indo-Pacific and its geopolitical outlook in regional affairs. It is organized as follows:

- ≈ pp. 9–13 describe Australia’s concerns about being caught between the United States and China in their increasingly heated great-power competition and Canberra’s emphasis on promoting a rules-based order as a framework for strategic and economic policy.
- ≈ pp. 13–15 analyze Australia’s efforts to militate against great-power tensions by working more closely with other middle powers, small states, and regional and unilateral groupings.
- ≈ pp. 15–17 question both the precepts of a rules- or values-based order and the proponent states’ own adherence to such an order.
- ≈ pp. 17–20 call for a regional order that is reconceived, negotiated, and led by middle powers and small states.

#### CONCERNS ABOUT GEOSTRATEGIC COMPETITION

As a geostrategic framing device, the Indo-Pacific concept crystallizes Australia’s mounting concerns about, in the words of Prime Minister Scott Morrison, the current “era of great-power competition.”<sup>2</sup> More specifically, the *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper* warned that “China is challenging America’s position” and that “the stability of the Indo-Pacific region...cannot be assumed,” a sentiment reiterated in the *2020 Defence Strategic Update*.<sup>3</sup> Minister for Defence Linda Reynolds has baldly stated that “there are activities

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<sup>1</sup> Scott Morrison, “In Our Interest” (2019 Lowy Lecture, Sydney, October 3, 2019) ≈ <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/2019-lowy-lecture-prime-minister-scott-morrison>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Australian Government, *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper* (Canberra, November 2017), 1 ≈ <https://www.fpwhitepaper.gov.au>; and Department of Defence (Australia), *2020 Defence Strategic Update* (Canberra, July 2020).

China has pursued that we believe are counterproductive to maintaining strategic stability across the Indo-Pacific.”<sup>4</sup>

Despite this, Morrison has argued that “Australia does not have to choose between the United States and China”<sup>5</sup> as “it is in no one’s interest in the Indo-Pacific to see an inevitably more competitive U.S.-China relationship become adversarial.”<sup>6</sup> This position reflects Australia’s status as a middle power capable of exerting influence to alter outcomes in specific instances but with limited capacity to independently shape its region’s security order.<sup>7</sup> This means that middle powers tend to adopt pragmatic foreign and strategic policies. Australia is thus necessarily pragmatic about its geostrategic outlook. It is keen to avoid the Indo-Pacific becoming polarized, given that its alliance with the United States is regularly described as “the bedrock” of its security, while Australia’s economic well-being is dependent on China.<sup>8</sup>

While interpretations of the depth of its formal commitments under the U.S. alliance differ, Australia relies on U.S. extended nuclear deterrence, intelligence sharing, and imported technological and defense capabilities, with a decades-long emphasis on interoperability leaving some capabilities dependent on continued access to U.S. technology and expertise. Given increasing Chinese and U.S. belligerence, particularly over Taiwan, there is an acute risk that Australia may be entrapped into supporting the United States in a conflict not of its choosing. Conversely, given that President Donald Trump has adopted an “America first” foreign policy, publicly questioned the value of certain alliances (although, notably, not with Australia), and indicated a preference for U.S. global retrenchment, there is uncertainty about the reliability of the U.S. commitment under the alliance and U.S. capacity and will to act as a stabilizing force in the Indo-Pacific and beyond.

Australia’s partial solution to growing tensions in the Indo-Pacific is to avoid explicitly taking sides by instead emphasizing the importance of the rules-based order, as “Australia’s security and prosperity would...suffer in a world governed by power alone.”<sup>9</sup> Despite not expressly adopting the “free and

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<sup>4</sup> Linda Reynolds, “Institute for Regional Security Keynote, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra,” Department of Defence (Australia), September 13, 2019 ≈ <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/minister/lreynolds/speeches/institute-regional-security-keynote-national-gallery-australia-canberra>.

<sup>5</sup> Morrison, “In Our Interest.”

<sup>6</sup> Scott Morrison, “Where We Live” (Asialink Bloomberg Address, Sydney, June 26, 2019) ≈ <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/where-we-live-asialink-bloomberg-address>.

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Carr, “Is Australia a Middle Power? A Systemic Impact Approach,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 68, no. 1 (2014): 70–84.

<sup>8</sup> Morrison, “In Our Interest.”

<sup>9</sup> Australian Government, *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper*, 24.

open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP) concept used by Japan and the United States, in substance Australia’s interpretation of the rules-based order mirrors Japan’s definition. Morrison has repeatedly referred to Australia wanting to see “an open, rules-based Indo-Pacific where the rights of all states are respected.”<sup>10</sup> However, while Japan and the United States have developed FOIP strategies, for Australia this order remains primarily a normative framing for the emerging regional order, reflecting its desire to avoid overtly siding against China.

Until recently, Australia prioritized the economic aspects of the rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific. Alongside other states, it advocated for the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which was intended as a wide-ranging free trade agreement between Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, Vietnam, and the United States. While negotiations concluded in 2015, after the election of President Trump, the United States withdrew from the agreement. In its place, Australia, alongside the remaining ten states, signed the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) in 2017. Australia is also negotiating the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) with fifteen Indo-Pacific states (several of which are signatories to the CPTPP). Notably, China is a negotiating party to the RCEP as well.

Over the last few years there has been a shift from economic to strategic concerns in Australia’s official discourse about the Indo-Pacific. For example, there is an increasing perception that gray-zone challenges are “creating an uneven playing field for strategic competition that cedes new advantages to technologies and behaviors not adequately bound by existing laws and norms.”<sup>11</sup> The view that the rules-based order is “under increasing pressure” as “newly powerful countries want greater influence and to challenge some of the rules” is now common.<sup>12</sup> This concern has become more explicitly directed at China’s perceived noncompliance with the “rules.” For example, in 2016, Australia used this line of argument to implicitly criticize China for not complying with the tribunal finding that China’s claimed nine-dash line and “historic rights” had no legal basis under the United Nations Convention

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<sup>10</sup> Scott Morrison (speech, Singapore, June 7, 2019) ~ <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/speech-singapore>.

<sup>11</sup> Linda Reynolds (keynote address at the Hudson Institute, Washington, D.C, November 2, 2019) ~ <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/minister/lreynolds/speeches/keynote-address-hudson-institute-washington-dc-0>.

<sup>12</sup> Department of Defence (Australia), *2016 Defence White Paper* (Canberra, February 25, 2016), 45 ~ <https://www.defence.gov.au/WhitePaper/Docs/2016-Defence-White-Paper.pdf>.

on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).<sup>13</sup> This criticism has since become more explicit; Defence Minister Reynolds has observed that “Australia is focused on ensuring that China’s engagement—like any other country’s—augments, not hinders, those [international] institutions ability to operate as fora for equitable decision-making with tangible, positive impacts.”<sup>14</sup> Morrison has also argued that “China has in many ways changed the world, so we would expect the terms of its engagement to change too.”<sup>15</sup>

In addition to more broadly held concerns about China’s activities in the South China and East China Seas, Australia is anxious about China’s growing influence in Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands. Indeed, in the *2020 Defence Strategic Update* released in July, the government specified that its defense planning will focus on a specific part of the Indo Pacific, its “immediate region,” described as “ranging from the north-eastern Indian Ocean, through maritime and mainland South East Asia to Papua New Guinea and the South West Pacific.”<sup>16</sup>

Given their proximity, the Pacific Islands have long been identified as falling only behind national defense in the hierarchy of Australia’s strategic interests. Australia is therefore concerned that China’s economic programs—particularly its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—will undermine the existing regional economic order and extend Beijing’s influence. Much alarm has been expressed about the risk of “debt-trap diplomacy” arising from BRI, with claims that China can use its lending to coerce Pacific Island and other small states if they are unable to service their loans.<sup>17</sup> This discourse reached a fever pitch in April 2018 when reports emerged claiming that China was in talks to build a military base in Vanuatu. While both the Vanuatu and Chinese governments denied the reports, then prime minister Malcolm Turnbull stated that Australia “would view with great concern the establishment of any foreign military bases in those Pacific Island countries and neighbours of ours.”<sup>18</sup> Former foreign minister Julie Bishop explicitly

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<sup>13</sup> Julie Bishop, “Australia Supports Peaceful Dispute Resolution in the South China Sea,” Minister for Foreign Affairs (Australia), Press Release, July 12, 2016 ~ <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/julie-bishop/media-release/australia-supports-peaceful-dispute-resolution-south-china-sea>.

<sup>14</sup> Reynolds (keynote address at Hudson Institute).

<sup>15</sup> Morrison, “In Our Interest.”

<sup>16</sup> Department of Defence, *2020 Defence Strategic Update*, 21.

<sup>17</sup> Sam Parker and Gabrielle Cheftiz, “Debtbook Diplomacy: China’s Strategic Leveraging of Its Newfound Economic Influence and the Consequences for U.S. Foreign Policy,” Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, March 2018 ~ <https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/files/publication/Debtbook%20Diplomacy%20PDF.pdf>.

<sup>18</sup> Catherine Graue, “Chinese Military Base in Pacific Would Be of ‘Great Concern,’ Turnbull Tells Vanuatu,” ABC News (Australia), April 10, 2018 ~ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-04-10/china-military-base-in-vanuatu-report-of-concern-turnbull-says/9635742>.

said that Australia wants to “ensure that they [Pacific Island states] retain their sovereignty, that they have sustainable economies and that they are not trapped into unsustainable debt outcomes,” which she identified as being threatened by increased Chinese lending.<sup>19</sup>

In partial response to BRI, Australia partnered with the United States and Japan to establish the Blue Dot Network, with the stated aim of creating a globally recognized evaluation and certification system for roads, ports, and bridges. However, this initiative does not involve infrastructure funding, which is what smaller Indo-Pacific states need. Australia has sought to address this gap by creating the Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific, to which it has allocated A\$2 billion.<sup>20</sup> It has also agreed to fund major infrastructure projects, including the submarine Coral Sea Cable System connecting Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands to Australia and the Papua New Guinea Electrification Partnership. On the electrification partnership, Australia is working alongside Japan, New Zealand, and the United States to connect 70% of Papua New Guineans to electricity by 2030. Yet the challenge to Australia’s attempt to—in the words of Bishop—“compete” with China in infrastructure funding is that the infrastructure needs of the Pacific Islands are almost infinite.<sup>21</sup> Thus, for them it is not a matter of choosing between partners. Indeed, Pacific leaders do not necessarily see China’s increased presence in negative terms. According to Dame Meg Taylor, secretary general of the Pacific Islands Forum, “if there is one word that might resonate amongst all forum members when it comes to China, that word is access. Access to markets, technology, financing, infrastructure. Access to a viable future.”<sup>22</sup>

#### AUSTRALIA EMBRACES MINILATERALISM

While the U.S. alliance remains central to its security, Australia has also committed to working with “like-minded partners to maintain

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<sup>19</sup> David Wroe, “Australia Will Compete with China to Save Pacific Sovereignty, Says Bishop,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, June 18, 2018 [~ https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/australia-will-compete-with-china-to-save-pacific-sovereignty-says-bishop-20180617-p4zm1h.html](https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/australia-will-compete-with-china-to-save-pacific-sovereignty-says-bishop-20180617-p4zm1h.html).

<sup>20</sup> Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Australia), “Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific” [~ https://www.aifp.gov.au](https://www.aifp.gov.au).

<sup>21</sup> Wroe, “Australia Will Compete with China to Save Pacific Sovereignty, Says Bishop.”

<sup>22</sup> Meg Taylor, “The China Alternative: Changing Regional Order in the Pacific Islands” (keynote address at the University of the South Pacific, Port Vila, February 8, 2019) [~ https://www.forumsec.org/keynote-address-by-dame-meg-taylor-secretary-general-the-china-alternative-changing-regional-order-in-the-pacific-islands](https://www.forumsec.org/keynote-address-by-dame-meg-taylor-secretary-general-the-china-alternative-changing-regional-order-in-the-pacific-islands).

the rules-based order.”<sup>23</sup> This is significant, as it signals that Australia is thinking beyond its alliance with the United States to “work more closely with the region’s major democracies, bilaterally and in small groupings.”<sup>24</sup> The *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper* singles out Japan, Indonesia, India, and South Korea as “central to this agenda.”<sup>25</sup>

Australia has a long history of engaging with regional multilateral institutions—most significantly with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as a dialogue partner and with the ASEAN Regional Forum and the East Asia Summit as a member. Australia is also a member of the Pacific Islands Forum, although island member states are pushing for it and New Zealand to take a less active role. However, these institutions have not played a substantive role in managing emerging tensions in the region, particularly those in the South China Sea.

This has seen Australia increasingly turn to minilateral groupings to pursue its strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific. These include the Quad between Australia, the United States, Japan, and India; the Australia-U.S.-Japan and Australia-India-Japan trilaterals; and the planned Australia-India-Indonesia trilateral. While these groupings are dialogues rather than formal institutions, they are increasingly important forums for strategic coordination. Australia has also stepped up its engagement with bilateral partners, including elevating its relationship with Japan to the status of special strategic partnership in 2014, and its relationship with India to that of a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2020. Further afield, the Five Eyes intelligence-sharing partnership between Australia, the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and New Zealand is increasingly being presented as a broader strategic, and potentially economic, partnership.

The Quad has attracted the most attention since its revival in 2017, as it is frequently seen as a way to dilute or constrain China’s power. U.S. secretary of state Mike Pompeo has aided this perception, stating that the Quad “will prove very important in the efforts ahead, ensuring that China retains only its proper place in the world.”<sup>26</sup> Australia avoided publicly commenting on this statement, but was likely unsettled, as it prefers to avoid explicitly describing China as a strategic competitor or the Quad as a coalition to balance China.

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<sup>23</sup> Department of Defence (Australia), *2016 Defence White Paper*, 46.

<sup>24</sup> Australian Government, *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper*, 4.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Michael R. Pompeo (speech at the Heritage Foundation, Washington, D.C., October 22, 2019) ~ <https://translations.state.gov/2019/10/22/secretary-michael-r-pompeo-at-the-heritage-foundation-presidents-club-meeting-trump-administration-diplomacy-the-untold-story>.

Australia instead emphasizes that the Quad represents a meeting between states with “shared values.”<sup>27</sup>

Yet, while member states of the Quad and Australia’s other new and enhanced strategic partnerships in the Indo-Pacific may claim (not unproblematically) to share the same broad values—particularly support for democracy and the rule of law—whether they share the same interests is less clear. Quad members have differing strategic geographies, threat perceptions, and relationships with China and therefore cannot necessarily be relied on to perceive, or respond to, a threat in the same or even a coordinated way. This is consequential because if the Quad and Australia’s other strategic partnerships become increasingly focused on defense and security issues, including joint military exercises without clear purposes, they may be misperceived as quasi-military alliances.<sup>28</sup> This poses risks to Australia and its partners, which may find themselves making ambiguous political and military commitments that unintentionally draw them into future conflict. Of more concern, their actions may be interpreted by China as threatening, thereby exacerbating Australia’s strategic vulnerability.

### QUESTIONING THE RULES-BASED ORDER

Australia’s sense of strategic unease about being caught between an activist China and an unpredictable United States is shared by other Indo-Pacific states, both large and small. Many Southeast Asian and Pacific Island states are also reluctant to choose between China and the United States. For many Southeast Asian states, in particular, China’s proximity means that decoupling is not seen as a realistic option. Smaller Indo-Pacific states, such as those in the Pacific Islands, are also increasingly questioning whether the FOIP concept, and the rules-based order it advocates, best serves their interests.

Even as Australia and other advocates of the FOIP concept or its variations emphasize the importance of the rules-based order, they do not engage in much explicit reflection about whether such an order actually exists (or still exists) in the sense that rules are acknowledged or that states behave in accordance with the knowledge that there will be a cost if they violate the rules. There is also little critical reflection about which states made the

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<sup>27</sup> Morrison, “In Our Interest.”

<sup>28</sup> Benjamin Zala, “Taking the Potential Costs of the Quad Seriously,” in *Debating the Quad*, ed. Andrew Carr, Center of Gravity, no. 38 (Canberra: ANU Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, 2018), 19–22.

rules on which this claimed order is based, when they were made, and whose interests they serve. The fact that a number of these rules were made when many Indo-Pacific states were still colonies (and noting that some still are) and therefore played no active role in making them is overlooked, as is the fact that many rules date back to a period of time when the distribution of power in the international system was different. This is important because advocates of the rules-based order commonly describe the rules as “liberal,” but they were not made by states freely and equally agreeing to the content of those rules—or willing to be bound by them—as liberalism would envisage.

The question of whose interests these rules serve is fraught. Several aspects of the rules-based order have been important for smaller Indo-Pacific states, particularly the principle of sovereign equality, which has largely protected them from overt foreign incursion and operated as a valuable diplomatic bargaining chip. In the Pacific Islands, UNCLOS has recognized and protected (at least in law) their massive—and resource-rich—maritime exclusive economic zones. The value of other aspects of the rules-based order for smaller Indo-Pacific states is more questionable. For example, as currently implemented, trade liberalization can have mixed—and often perverse—outcomes, particularly as the rules applied to smaller states are often deeply inequitable.

Advocates of the FOIP concept and the rules-based order also engage in little critical reflection about whether they themselves obey the rules. For example, Australia claims that it is a “determined advocate of liberal institutions, universal values, and human rights,”<sup>29</sup> yet for years it operated immigration detention centers in Papua New Guinea and Nauru where those rights were abused. Australia and other advocates also assume that the “rules” guarantee “free” trade, “open” investment, labor “mobility,” “competitive” tendering, the “rule of law,” and liberal democratic standards of “good governance.” Yet Australia, like its partners, seldom critically examines the foundations of its assumptions. In reality, all states have restrictions on trade, investment, labor mobility, and tendering; the rule of law is imperfectly applied; and “good” liberal democratic standards of government are often not achieved.

Indo-Pacific states are entitled to query Australia’s commitment to the rules-based order after Morrison argued in September 2019 that “we should avoid any reflex towards a negative globalism that coercively seeks to impose

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<sup>29</sup> Australian Government, *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper*, 11.



a mandate from an often ill defined borderless global community.”<sup>30</sup> On that basis, Morrison stated that “under my leadership Australia’s international engagement will be squarely driven by Australia’s national interests.”<sup>31</sup> Foreign Minister Marise Payne attempted to add nuance to these comments in June 2020 when she argued that “Covid-19 has shown that our international order is as important as ever.” However, she followed up by saying that “multilateralism for the sake of it is rather pointless.”<sup>32</sup> Payne suggested that Australia’s engagement with international institutions and commitment to the rules-based order will continue to be conducted narrowly in pursuit of perceived national interest. In any event, Morrison doubled-down on his comments in his address to the Aspen Security Forum in August 2020, in which he said that his “view hasn’t changed.”<sup>33</sup>

Indeed, Australian official discourse has recently shifted to emphasize “values” rather than “rules.” For example, Australian leaders explicitly refer to “shared democratic values” when discussing partners such as the United States, India, Japan, and New Zealand.<sup>34</sup> The *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper* included a specific section devoted to “Australia’s values,” which were identified as “support for political, economic and religious freedoms, liberal democracy, the rule of law, racial and gender equality, and mutual respect.”<sup>35</sup> Australia has linked the rules-based order and democratic values; the white paper cautions that “new rules and norms could emerge that are not consistent with Australia’s interests and values.”<sup>36</sup> But the more explicit coupling of this order with values is problematic because values are usually imprecise and more culturally and nationally specific than rules, particularly in a region as large and diverse as the Indo-Pacific.

#### ROOM TO MANEUVER IN THE MIDDLE?

Given the uncertainty of its geostrategic outlook, Australia needs to consider adopting a more “free and open” strategic and foreign policy

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<sup>30</sup> Morrison, “In Our Interest.”

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Marise Payne, “Australia and the World in the Time of Covid-19” (speech, Canberra, June 16, 2020) ~ <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/marise-payne/speech/australia-and-world-time-covid-19>.

<sup>33</sup> Scott Morrison, “Tomorrow in the Indo-Pacific” (address at Aspen Security Forum, Aspen, August 5, 2020) ~ <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/address-aspen-security-forum-tomorrow-indo-pacific>.

<sup>34</sup> Department of Defence (Australia), *2016 Defence White Paper*, 134.

<sup>35</sup> Australian Government, *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper*, 2.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 82.

in the Indo-Pacific and beyond. Behind closed doors, other middle, or “upper-middle,” powers—including Japan, India, Indonesia, and Canada—are questioning whether the United States should continue to take the lead in securing order in the Indo-Pacific, and in fact do not necessarily trust that the United States is capable of doing so. Over the last two decades Australia has demonstrated its capacity as a middle power by leading interventions in Timor-Leste and the Solomon Islands and most recently by implementing its cross-government policy to “step up” its engagement in the Pacific Islands. Drawing confidence from these and other efforts, Australia should partner with other middle powers and smaller states to create a new Indo-Pacific security order. Indeed, this proposal accords with Morrison’s recent observation that “Australia is not being passive—we’re acting to shape...tomorrow right now,” including by creating “new networks of co-operation.”<sup>37</sup> It similarly reflects the spirit of Payne’s recent call to action:

There are times to pursue quiet diplomacy behind the scenes. But there are also times to voice our concerns and persuade others of the need for a course of action. By all means, we can be small in our thinking, timid in purpose, and risk adverse. Or alternatively, and in my view, vitally necessary, we can be confident. We can believe in Australia’s role in the world.<sup>38</sup>

Australia has cooperated with middle powers in the MIKTA group, consisting of Mexico, Indonesia, Korea, Turkey, and Australia. This grouping formed in 2013 and is motivated by the “necessity to coordinate their efforts within G-20 and beyond.”<sup>39</sup> Yet MIKTA also demonstrates the challenge of basing such cooperation on shared interests and values. Its member states have differing strategic interests and demonstrate varying commitment to “the fundamental values and interests, including a commitment to open economies, human rights and democracy,” on which the grouping is supposedly based.<sup>40</sup>

Therefore, an Indo-Pacific security order shaped by middle powers and smaller states will be better guided by rules than by values. The UN Charter and other UN treaties remain a good starting point for determining these rules, but given its existing limitations, the rules-based order needs to be

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<sup>37</sup> Morrison, “Tomorrow in the Indo-Pacific.”

<sup>38</sup> Payne, “Australia and the World in the Time of Covid-19.”

<sup>39</sup> “MIKTA Vision Statement,” MIKTA, May 22, 2015 ~ <http://www.mikta.org/about/vision.php?ckattempt=1>.

<sup>40</sup> “MIKTA—Mexico, Indonesia, the Republic of Korea, Turkey, Australia,” Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Australia) ~ <https://www.dfat.gov.au/international-relations/international-organisations/mikta/Pages/mikta>.

reformed to recognize problems with the current rules and to make them attractive to smaller states. This will not be easy, particularly given the diversity (of size, economy, political system, geographic location, and strategic outlook) of states in the Indo-Pacific. Furthermore, a reformed rules-based order will not necessarily be “liberal.” Instead, reflecting the tendency of middle powers to compromise, it may require negotiating pragmatic “good enough” rules that are acceptable to as many Indo-Pacific states as possible. This may involve middle powers compromising some of their “shared values” and making sacrifices to their national interests (narrowly defined) in service of the overriding interest of preserving regional peace and security based on rules that are seen as legitimate and respect-worthy by many states, not just the most powerful ones.

In some respects, this proposal echoes former Australian prime minister Kevin Rudd’s unsuccessful Asia-Pacific Community concept. It differs from that proposal, from its later approximation at the East Asia Summit, and from those made by commentators<sup>41</sup> by excluding both the United States and China. If this proposed order included either state, it would be perceived as balancing against the excluded power, exacerbating strategic vulnerability. Instead, a security order led by middle powers and smaller states would need to rebalance regional power dynamics by restraining both China and the United States from escalating their developing competition to outright confrontation. No middle power, or combination of middle powers, currently has the military capacity to directly oppose China (or the United States). But if enough middle powers and small states come together, they could have sufficient military power, as well as economic and “soft” power, to offer a restraining force and act as an honest broker in defusing tensions between the United States and China, between themselves, and between themselves and the United States or China. This would involve a combination of engagement, dialogue, cooperation, and—where required—deterrence.

Nothing about creating an Indo-Pacific security order negotiated and led by middle powers and small states will be easy. It will strain the alliance relationships and strategic partnerships that states such as Australia, Japan, and India have with the United States. It will also be challenged by Southeast Asian states’ emphasis on ASEAN centrality as well as by the preference of South and Southeast Asian states (particularly India and Indonesia) and Pacific Island states for nonalignment and autonomy. It will require sustained

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<sup>41</sup> See, for example, Rory Medcalf, *Contest for the Indo-Pacific: Why China Won’t Map the Future* (Melbourne: La Trobe University Press, 2020); and Kori Schake, *America vs. the West: Can the Liberal World Order Be Preserved?* (Sydney: Penguin, 2018).

diplomatic commitment and compromise—sometimes in opposition to perceived core national interests and values. This suggests that creating this order will necessarily be an iterative process. As noted, the UN Charter provides a starting point as it has already achieved widespread agreement. Beyond that, creating this order will involve states negotiating rules in discrete and minimally controversial areas, such as health security, pandemic response, piracy, and humanitarian assistance and disaster response. As confidence grows, they could extend negotiations into more contested areas, such as by rethinking regional trade and investment regimes or revising UNCLOS to respond to the changes being wrought by climate change.

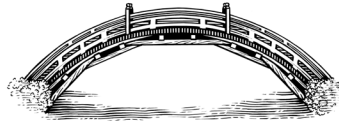
Calls for radical change such as this can be easily dismissed as impractical, idealistic, and naive. But we need to challenge dominant perceptions about what is practical and underlying assumptions about what is possible or desirable, remembering that these perceptions and assumptions are social constructs. Just as they have been constructed, so can they be reconstructed. And if China and the United States continue on a trajectory toward confrontation—which given the belligerence of both regimes may quickly escalate to conflict—it seems worthwhile for Australia, other middle powers, and smaller states to have free and open pragmatic conversations about how they can work together to ensure continued peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific. ◆

ROUNDTABLE ESSAY

# India and the Changing Dynamics of the Indo-Pacific

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*Sujan R. Chinoy*



**SUJAN R. CHINOY** is Director General of the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses in New Delhi (India). He was formerly a career diplomat of the Indian Foreign Service from 1981 to 2018, including service as India's ambassador to Japan, Mexico, and the Republic of the Marshall Islands and high commissioner to Belize. Ambassador Chinoy has over 25 years of experience on East Asia and Asia-Pacific affairs. He has served in Indian missions in Hong Kong and Beijing, as consul general in Shanghai and Sydney, and as India's representative to the First Committee at the United Nations in New York, dealing with disarmament and international security affairs. He also spent four years on deputation with the National Security Council Secretariat in the Prime Minister's Office in India. He can be reached at <1981src@gmail.com>.

**KEYWORDS:** INDIA; CHINA'S RISE; FREE AND OPEN INDO-PACIFIC; QUAD

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This essay examines issues relating to India's unique geography, interests, and potential role in the Indo-Pacific region against the backdrop of a rapidly evolving geostrategic environment occasioned by the rise of China as an economic and military power.

### MAIN ARGUMENT

The Indo-Pacific reflects two realities. The first is the fact that economic growth and prosperity, which was confined to the Asia-Pacific region following World War II, has now spread across a broader community to envelope Southeast Asia, South Asia, and the littoral nations of the Indian Ocean. The second is China's effort to foist its supply chains and influence onto the broader region using infrastructure, connectivity, and debt diplomacy as part of its stratagem. A core group of states—the United States, Japan, Australia, and India, all engaged in a dialogue known as the Quad—is propagating an open, transparent, and rules-based order, with emphasis on freedom of navigation and overflight. For many nations, there are now growing alternatives to China's Belt and Road Initiative. India is the only country in the Quad to face both maritime and land boundary challenges from China.

### POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Though India does not have an alliance partnership with any country, its engagement with the other Quad countries is deepening, including in defense. For India, the disruption caused by China's forays into the Indian Ocean and South Asia and aggressive actions on its borders will remain its priority.
- China's unilateralism, especially in the South China Sea, is uniting the opposition; its efforts to evict established stakeholders from the region have resulted in a renewed global commitment to a rules-based order.
- The optimal way forward is for China to acknowledge that multipolarity has a better chance of building enduring structures for peace and prosperity in a post-pandemic world.

The world is undergoing a fundamental transformation. The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed flaws in multilateral structures and highlighted the lacunae in national capacities. Multilateralism, already on the brink in recent years, has been pushed into an abyss not just by the rivalry between the United States and the China-Russia tandem but by the greatest power on earth retracting in favor of an “America first” policy. The global economy is reeling under the unexpected effects of Covid-19, with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) predicting an impending recession.<sup>1</sup> The notion of national security, or global security, is being reshaped. Trade and technology are being weaponized. Hedging and multi-aligning are part of every country’s strategic toolkit. There is growing uncertainty across the globe.

“Indo-Pacific” has been variously interpreted in the vision documents of several nations; however, a distinct convergence has emerged in recent years at both the ideational and policy levels. Credit must go to the Trump administration for making a concerted effort to regain the ground lost by his shilly-shallying predecessors in the Asia-Pacific region—as much due to a blithe underestimation of the Chinese Communist Party as on account of a diversion of focus and resources to the global war on terrorism. The “rebalance to Asia” announced, but never fully implemented, during the Obama years has been given a vigorous thrust under the Trump administration’s “free and open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP) strategy. However, its impact on irreversible changes in the region is moot, a case in point being China’s blatant occupation and militarization of islands and features in the South China Sea over the past decade.

Effectively, China stepped into the vacuum left by the United States. Ironically, it is now championing the liberal trading order and multilateral institutions with the express purpose of molding them to suit its own ends. It is also unabashedly practicing coercion and “wolf warrior” diplomacy to ensure the global endorsement of its political and economic systems.

China’s rise has not been smooth. The West took 150 years to achieve an enduring balance of power through a long process of industrialization, war, and treaty negotiation. In China’s case, change has been so dazzlingly rapid that it is not just the outside world that has found it difficult to adjust to China’s rise. China itself seems entirely unprepared at the leadership level to accurately comprehend the implications of the change and expects the entire

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<sup>1</sup> Gita Gopinath, “Reopening from the Great Lockdown: Uneven and Uncertain Recovery,” IMF, June 24, 2020 ~ <https://blogs.imf.org/2020/06/24/reopening-from-the-great-lockdown-uneven-and-uncertain-recovery>.

world to adjust. However, it is unwilling to acknowledge the achievements and aspirations of other countries, especially democracies.

In the past, the Portuguese, the Dutch, and the British were motivated to acquire extraterritorial privileges and consolidate their presence using *mare liberum* and *mare clausum* strategies in the Indian Ocean.<sup>2</sup> These privileges enabled the colonial powers to secure trading rights and monopolies over raw materials for manufacturing centers back home. Today, China appears to be driven by similar considerations as evident in the Belt and the Road Initiative (BRI), its growing presence in the Pacific Island nations, its island-grabbing spree in the South China Sea, and its quest for ports and basing rights along the Indian Ocean littoral. There is also no doubt that the U.S.-China trade war has been disruptive. No two rival powers are as interlinked by trade and investment, nor have other countries been as intertwined in a web of relations with both China and the United States. This makes for difficult choices for all others, especially in the Indo-Pacific.

This essay examines the changing dynamics of the Indo-Pacific and assesses India's role in promoting an alternative to China's vision for the region. The essay is organized as follows:

- ≈ pp. 24–29 look at the evolution of the Indo-Pacific concept and current regional dynamics.
- ≈ pp. 29–31 focus on India's role and partnerships in the Indo-Pacific.
- ≈ pp. 32–33 address the deterioration of India-China relations and India's expansion of maritime security activities.
- ≈ pp. 33–35 look ahead at ways in which like-minded states such as India and its partners could work together in a post-pandemic world to improve Indo-Pacific security and development.

## THE EVOLVING DYNAMICS OF THE INDO-PACIFIC

The term “Indo-Pacific” is an affirmation of the natural spread of economic growth and prosperity in recent years over a wide region extending well beyond East and Southeast Asia to include South Asia and the dynamic east coast of Africa. The term “Asia-Pacific” has always lacked the capacity to fully express Asia's true continental identity or the significance of the region. Indo-Pacific is more inclusive and accommodating of the growing aspirations of a wider constituency. It captures the interdependence of

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<sup>2</sup> Mónica Brito Vieira, “Mare Liberum vs. Mare Clausum: Grotius, Freitas, and Selden's Debate on Dominion over the Seas,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 64, no. 3 (2003): 361–77.



the oceanic spaces and the interconnectedness of trade, technology, and security throughout the region.

It is lamentable, however, that economic success in the Indo-Pacific has not been matched by a corresponding consensus on a stable security architecture. In recent decades, the region has witnessed some of the highest military expenditures and most intractable territorial disputes in the world. Although the United States' trade, economic, and military presence in the Indo-Pacific has been a stabilizing factor since World War II, today the region is a contested space where China is moving to redefine its standing in the world order by trying to expel U.S. forces through economic inducements and military pressure. This has implications for the region's ability to create a secure, prosperous, and multipolar Asia.

### *China's Growing Assertiveness*

China aims to become a moderately developed country by 2021, the centenary of the Chinese Communist Party's establishment. Furthermore, it seeks to modernize its military forces by 2035 and to realize the "China dream"—the emergence of a strong, modern, and rejuvenated Chinese nation—by 2050.<sup>3</sup> The party's mantra "community of a shared future for mankind" is an ill-concealed effort to reinvent the Middle Kingdom, with China at the center of a new world order.<sup>4</sup> Policies such as Made in China 2025 and the creation of vast physical and digital infrastructure networks linking China's manufacturing nodes with global markets through BRI are part of the stratagem.

China's aggressive actions in the South China Sea have pitted its ill-founded maritime claims against the rights of several members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), including Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia. For example, it has used illegal fishing to undermine Indonesia's sovereign rights in the Natuna Islands.<sup>5</sup> Beijing summarily rejected the ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) on

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<sup>3</sup> "China Focus: 'Chinese Dream' Marches through Sixth Year," Xinhua, November 29, 2018 ~ [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-11/29/c\\_137639948.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-11/29/c_137639948.htm).

<sup>4</sup> You Yang and Li Shiyu, "70 Years of Diplomacy: Building a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind," CGTN, October 9, 2019 ~ <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2019-10-09/Building-a-community-with-a-shared-future-for-mankind-KvC7xyQf3G/index.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Novan Iman Santosa, "Keeping Chinese Fishing Vessels from Natuna, Defending People's Welfare," *Jakarta Post*, January 7, 2020 ~ <https://www.thejakartapost.com/academia/2020/01/07/keeping-chinese-fishing-vessels-from-natuna-defending-peoples-welfare.html>.

China's so-called historical rights, nine-dash line, and exaggerated exclusive economic zone claims. China has used its People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia, popularly called the "fishing militia," to enforce claims in both the South and East China Seas. In an unfriendly gesture, a Chinese submarine sailed without surfacing in the contiguous zone northeast of Amami Oshima in Japan's Kagoshima Prefecture.<sup>6</sup> The Chinese defense ministry has also threatened Japan for hosting U.S. intermediate-range missiles.<sup>7</sup>

China harbors deep suspicions about the FOIP concept and the Quad grouping of Australia, the United States, India, and Japan, which it believes are driven primarily by the United States to contain China's rise. It also believes that trilateral and other dialogue structures involving the United States, Japan, and India or the United States, Japan, and Australia are aimed at containment. Recently, Chinese scholars and officials appear to have adopted a wait-and-see approach toward the Indo-Pacific instead of outright opposition. This is partly because "ASEAN centrality" affords China an opportunity to dilute narratives in the Indo-Pacific that could prove inimical to its interests. China is a stakeholder, for example, in the code of conduct negotiations with the ASEAN countries, the outcome of which will decide the fate of the South China Sea and have implications for the broader region. Beyond ASEAN, China uses bilateral economic engagement with Japan and Australia to mitigate the effects of a pushback, whether in regard to Tokyo's partial economic decoupling<sup>8</sup> or Canberra's deep scrutiny of its influence peddling.<sup>9</sup> With India, however, China has less space for maneuver in light of the public outcry against its aggressive policies along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China border area.

### *Regional Responses to China and the Rise of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific*

China's unilateralism and aggressive irredentism in pursuit of the China dream and disregard of core global values have inevitably

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<sup>6</sup> "Japan Detects Apparent Chinese Submarine Traveling Near Amami-Oshima Island," *Japan Times*, June 21, 2020 ~ <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/06/21/national/japan-detects-foreign-submarine-amami-oshima>.

<sup>7</sup> Kristin Huang, "China Urges Japan to Just Say No to Hosting American Missiles," *South China Morning Post*, June 25, 2020 ~ <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3090469/china-urges-japan-just-say-no-hosting-american-missiles>.

<sup>8</sup> Andrea A. Fischetti and Antoine Roth, "Will Japan 'Decouple' from China?" *Tokyo Review*, April 24, 2020 ~ <https://www.tokyoreview.net/2020/04/will-japan-decouple-from-china>.

<sup>9</sup> "NSW Labor MP Shaoquett Moselmane's Home, Office Raided by Police," ABC (Australia), June 26, 2020 ~ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-06-26/nsw-labor-mp-shaoquett-moselmane-home-raided-by-police/12395712>.

encountered opposition. The Quad countries and many others have advocated for the creation of a free, open, and inclusive regional architecture that preserves a rules-based order, freedom of navigation and overflight, and ASEAN centrality as key to a peaceful and prosperous Indo-Pacific. China's actions in recent years have served to soften the nuanced differences among the Quad countries on the Indo-Pacific concept and their role in securing a better future for the region. Far from being an "attention-grabbing idea" that would soon "dissipate like ocean foam," as Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi once put it,<sup>10</sup> the FOIP concept and the Quad have gradually acquired form and substance. There is pragmatic appreciation that not all nations grappling with the rise of China are democracies. In this spirit, the term "democratic," part of the grouping's early lexicon, has quietly been dropped to facilitate a broader dialogue in the Quad Plus format with nations that are not liberal democracies but that share many of the same concerns about China's rise.

ASEAN countries' dependence on China for their economic prosperity, and in some cases security, has grown in recent years, with Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar in particular heavily reliant on China. Nonetheless, at the 36th ASEAN Summit in June 2020, some Southeast Asian leaders boldly raised China's bullying tactics in the South China Sea as an issue.<sup>11</sup> Vietnam, the current ASEAN chair, called for a rules-based order in the region,<sup>12</sup> and even Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte, long under China's influence, emphasized the need for respect of UNCLOS.<sup>13</sup> Collectively, the ASEAN states have the capacity to mount a spirited response, but their response so far has been desultory at best. More fundamentally, at the individual level they are often inclined to seek Chinese accommodation. As a result, the group's joint statements have limited impact.

Traditional U.S. partners in the region such as Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand are caught in the U.S.-China geostrategic contest. Even South Korea, a U.S. alliance partner, is wary of embracing a FOIP strategy that Beijing

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<sup>10</sup> "Foreign Minister Wang Yi Meets the Press," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, Press Release, March 9, 2018 [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/zxxx\\_662805/t1540928.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1540928.shtml).

<sup>11</sup> Veeramalla Anjaiah, "ASEAN Leaders Raise SCS Issue Boldly at Summit," ASEAN Post, June 27, 2020 <https://theaseanpost.com/article/asean-leaders-raise-scs-issue-boldly-summit>.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Krissy Aguilar, "Duterte to ASEAN: Follow UNCLOS, Avoid 'Escalating Tension' in South China Sea," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, June 26, 2020 <https://globalnation.inquirer.net/188956/duterte-to-asean-follow-unclos-avoid-escalating-tension-in-south-china-sea>.

perceives as a U.S.-led containment ploy.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the traditional rivalry between South Korea and Japan ensures that a trilateral alliance with the United States in Northeast Asia remains a chimera. While Washington considers Seoul as a key anchor of the FOIP strategy, some Koreans view the strategy as a Japanese initiative, making the Japan–South Korea axis one of the weakest links.

Elsewhere in the region, Australia's *2020 Defence Strategic Update* and *2020 Force Structure Plan*, both released in July 2020, outline a new defense strategy and the investments necessary to develop relevant capabilities.<sup>15</sup> Realizing the threat to its longer-term security, Australia is reorienting its defense strategy to mitigate the risk of exclusive reliance on its coalition partnership. Over the next ten years, the Australian government will bolster its defense spending and allocate A\$575 billion to develop robust capacities of its own.<sup>16</sup>

As the world's largest economic and military power, the United States has long been accustomed to a degree of exceptionalism. This perhaps slows the pace at which opposition to China can coalesce. For example, the U.S. concept of freedom of navigation is hard on friend and foe alike. The United States routinely conducts freedom of navigation operations around a number of countries, including friendly nations such as India, Indonesia, Vietnam, and the Philippines. In the case of the South China Sea, these operations are an optical symbol of U.S. naval potency. Although they deny China the satisfaction of a complete takeover of the oceanic space, they do not reverse China's occupation and militarization of features in the South China Sea. Another debilitating factor is the United States' penchant for leveling criticism at potential partners on account of human rights and democracy. Not only are China and Myanmar cited in this context, but the Philippines (an alliance partner) is also a target. It could be argued that such an approach weakens consensus building.

The emerging contestation in the Pacific pits U.S. programs such as the BUILD Act, ARIA, and Asia EDGE against the blandishments offered

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<sup>14</sup> China is South Korea's biggest trading partner and its top investment destination. Joori Roh and Cynthia Kim, "South Korea's Exports Suffer Worst Slump in 11 Years as Pandemic Shatters World Trade," Reuters, April 30, 2020 ~ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-southkorea-economy-trade/south-koreas-exports-suffer-worst-slump-in-11-years-as-pandemic-shatters-world-trade-idUSKBN22D439>.

<sup>15</sup> Department of Defence (Australia), *2020 Defence Strategic Update* (Canberra, July 2020) ~ [https://www.defence.gov.au/StrategicUpdate-2020/docs/2020\\_Defence\\_Strategic\\_Update.pdf](https://www.defence.gov.au/StrategicUpdate-2020/docs/2020_Defence_Strategic_Update.pdf); and Department of Defence (Australia), *2020 Force Structure Plan* (Canberra, July 2020) ~ [https://www.defence.gov.au/StrategicUpdate-2020/docs/2020\\_Force\\_Structure\\_Plan.pdf](https://www.defence.gov.au/StrategicUpdate-2020/docs/2020_Force_Structure_Plan.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> Department of Defence (Australia), *2020 Defence Strategic Update*.

by China to small island nations.<sup>17</sup> Beyond revitalizing the Quad, Japan and Australia have joined the United States in the Blue Dot Network and Indo-Pacific Business Forum to promote infrastructure and connectivity. In addition, during President Donald Trump's visit to India in February 2020, the United States and India released a joint statement that clearly points to greater consultation between the two partners.<sup>18</sup>

### INDIA'S ROLE IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

India is committed to an inclusive security architecture for the Indo-Pacific (including the South China Sea) on the basis of respect for the rule of law, freedom of navigation and overflight, equal access to the commons and its natural resources, and resolution of disputes through dialogue.<sup>19</sup> India believes in a multipolar Asia in which there is no room for unilateralism or coercive behavior that threatens peace and development.

This position has evolved over the years. If India had earlier opposed the presence of foreign powers in the Indian Ocean, it now welcomes the presence of the United States, Japan, Australia, and other partner countries in the region, and even carries out joint exercises with a number of them to promote interoperability. In fact, India's relations with the United States, Japan, and Australia, in particular, have been qualitatively strengthened in recent years with a new thrust on economic and defense cooperation. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has said that India considers the United States an indispensable partner in every sector of India's transformation and progress.<sup>20</sup> The same could also be said of India's ties with Japan. Between these countries, there exists a growing convergence of views on the Indo-Pacific's emerging geostrategic and geoeconomic changes.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> The BUILD Act stands for Better Utilization of Investments Leading to Development Act, ARIA for Asia Reassurance Initiative Act, and Asia EDGE for Enhancing Development and Growth through Energy.

<sup>18</sup> "Joint Statement: Vision and Principles for India-U.S. Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership," Ministry of External Affairs (India), February 25, 2020 ~ [https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/32421/Joint\\_Statement\\_Vision\\_and\\_Principles\\_for\\_IndiaUS\\_Comprehensive\\_Global\\_Strategic\\_Partnership](https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/32421/Joint_Statement_Vision_and_Principles_for_IndiaUS_Comprehensive_Global_Strategic_Partnership).

<sup>19</sup> "Prime Minister's Keynote Address at Shangri La Dialogue," Ministry of External Affairs (India), Press Release, June 1, 2018 ~ <https://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/29943/Prime+Ministers+Keynote+Address+at+Shangri+La+Dialogue+June+01+2018>.

<sup>20</sup> "English Translation of Press Statement by External Affairs Minister during Visit of U.S. Secretary of State to India," Ministry of External Affairs (India), Press Release, October 25, 2017 ~ <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/29052>.

<sup>21</sup> "India-Australia-Japan-United States Consultations," Ministry of External Affairs (India), Press Release, November 4, 2019 ~ <https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/32006/indiaaustraliajapanunited+states+consultations>.

Today, the United States is arguably India's most important strategic partner—India conducts more bilateral military exercises with the United States than it does with any other country; the United States exercises more with India than with any other non-NATO partner. Agreements such as the General Security of Military Information Agreement, Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement, Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement, and Industrial Security Annex have opened up new prospects for defense cooperation. India and Japan have likewise deepened their “special strategic and global partnership” to include closer defense relations. India and Australia upgraded their ties to a comprehensive strategic partnership in a June 2020 virtual summit, where important pacts were concluded such as the Mutual Logistics Support Arrangement and the Joint Declaration on a Shared Vision for Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>22</sup> With India and Australia moving closer through India's participation in Kakadu, Pitch Black, and other exercises, the prospects for strengthening the Quad appear much brighter. Even though India is unlikely to enter into a formal alliance with any country,<sup>23</sup> in recent years it has concluded logistics-sharing agreements with the United States, Australia, France, Singapore, Japan, and South Korea. The progress on these cooperative agreements indicates that there is a growing appreciation of the geostrategic disruption caused by the rise of China. A logistics-sharing agreement with Russia is in an advanced stage of negotiation. India also conducted a bilateral maritime exercise with Russia in the Bay of Bengal in September 2020. For India, Russia remains a Pacific power with a legacy footprint in the Indian Ocean.

Since 2014, India has also transformed its Look East Policy into the Act East Policy, enhanced engagement with West Asia and Africa, and strengthened ties with Pacific Island and Indian Ocean littoral nations. Prime Minister Modi pointed out that “with a 7,500-kilometer-long coastline, India has a natural and immediate interest in the developments

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<sup>22</sup> “Virtual Summit between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Prime Minister Scott Morrison of Australia on 4th June 2020,” Ministry of External Affairs (India), Press Release, June 3, 2020 ~ [https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/32725/Virtual\\_Summit\\_between\\_Prime\\_Minister\\_Narendra\\_Modi\\_and\\_Prime\\_Minister\\_Scott\\_Morrison\\_of\\_Australia\\_on\\_4th\\_June\\_2020](https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/32725/Virtual_Summit_between_Prime_Minister_Narendra_Modi_and_Prime_Minister_Scott_Morrison_of_Australia_on_4th_June_2020); and “Joint Statement on a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between Republic of India and Australia,” Ministry of External Affairs (India), June 4, 2020 ~ [https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/32729/Joint\\_Statement\\_on\\_a\\_Comprehensive\\_Strategic\\_Partnership\\_between\\_Republic\\_of\\_India\\_and\\_Australia](https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/32729/Joint_Statement_on_a_Comprehensive_Strategic_Partnership_between_Republic_of_India_and_Australia).

<sup>23</sup> Sriram Lakshman, “U.S. Needs to ‘Go Beyond’ Alliances, Says S. Jaishankar,” *Hindu*, July 22, 2020 ~ <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/us-needs-to-go-beyond-alliances-says-s-jaishankar/article32165698.ece>; and “India Will Never Be a Part of an Alliance System, Says External Affairs Minister Jaishankar,” *Hindu*, July 20, 2020 ~ <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-has-never-been-part-of-an-alliance-and-will-never-be-jaishankar/article32142128.ece>.

in the Indo-Pacific region.<sup>24</sup> In fact, more than 90% of the country's trade traverses maritime routes.<sup>25</sup> India's "Security and Growth for All in the Region" (SAGAR) vision includes a five-pronged approach that focuses on deepening economic and security cooperation, strengthening maritime security capacities, advancing peace and security, responding to emergencies, and calling for respect for international maritime rules and norms by all countries.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, India has used its considerable naval and airlift capabilities to conduct humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations, particularly to help Maldives, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Fiji, Mozambique, and the Philippines. The country also conducts coordinated exclusive economic zone patrols with Maldives and Sri Lanka, has played an active role in conducting antipiracy operations in the Gulf of Aden, and has hosted the Information Fusion Centre for the Indian Ocean Region for white shipping.<sup>27</sup>

In his address at the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2018, Modi emphasized the following key elements of India's vision of the Indo-Pacific: free, open, and inclusive; ASEAN centrality; rules-based order; settlement of disputes through dialogue; equal access to the global commons with freedom of navigation and unimpeded commerce; security of the maritime environment; disaster relief; a balanced and stable trade regime; and connectivity.<sup>28</sup> This approach has enabled India to strengthen its defense and security cooperation with partner countries in the region. In addition to the ongoing programs, new developments include year-round military patrols in the Indian Ocean, improved maritime domain awareness, increased military training and technical support, and a quantum increase in bilateral and multilateral military exercises and dialogues. Modi also proposed an Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative at the 2019 East Asia Summit to conserve and sustainably use the maritime domain and make meaningful efforts to create a safe maritime space.<sup>29</sup> This is an extension of his earlier proposal for a blue economy.

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<sup>24</sup> Narendra Modi, interview with the *Wall Street Journal*, May 26, 2016.

<sup>25</sup> "Ministry of Shipping 2017- Year of Consolidation," Press Information Bureau (India), Press Release, December 20, 2017 ~ <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1513281>.

<sup>26</sup> Narendra Modi (address at the International Fleet Review 2016, Visakhapatnam, February 7, 2016) ~ <https://www.narendramodi.in/pm-modi-at-the-international-fleet-review-2016-in-visakhapatnam-andhra-pradesh-413019>.

<sup>27</sup> "Information Fusion Centre—Indian Ocean Region," Indian Navy ~ <https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/ifc-ior/about-us.html>.

<sup>28</sup> "Prime Minister's Keynote Address at Shangri La Dialogue."

<sup>29</sup> "Indo-Pacific Division Briefs," Ministry of External Affairs (India), February 7, 2020 ~ [https://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Indo\\_Feb\\_07\\_2020.pdf](https://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Indo_Feb_07_2020.pdf).

## A DOWNTURN IN INDIA-CHINA RELATIONS

Recently, distrust between India and China has deepened against the backdrop of escalating tensions in their ongoing border dispute.<sup>30</sup> China has also failed to reassure India about its new presence in the Indian Ocean and rent-seeking projects in South Asian countries such as Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Maldives. In light of these developments, New Delhi might need to review its Indo-Pacific vision, with a discernible shift from making policy pronouncements to developing strategies that leverage India's geographic location and naval power to offset Chinese pressure.

China must have noted that India's decision permitted the Quad to meet at the ministerial level in 2019, and it remains worried about the advantages that the Quad process might offer to India in the Indo-Pacific. China is also concerned about the presence and activities of the United States, Japan, Australia, the United Kingdom, and France, among others, in the waters surrounding India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands, just outside the Malacca Strait through which a great deal of China's vulnerable energy imports pass.<sup>31</sup> The sharp downturn in India-China relations due to border tensions is creating new opportunities for the Quad on the maritime front. A recent example is the passing exercise between Indian naval vessels and the USS *Nimitz*-led task force near the Malacca Strait in July 2020.<sup>32</sup>

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands could be further opened to friendly navies to promote greater cooperation. India's tri-service Andaman and Nicobar Command has progressively emerged as a linchpin of its regional maritime engagement in the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea. Various multilateral and bilateral maritime engagements such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation, the Milan exercises, coordinated patrols, and bilateral exercises with littoral states have contributed to India's engagement in this region.

As regional maritime forces have expanded their cooperation with the Indian Navy in recent years, there is a new appreciation in Southeast Asia for India's potential to offset China's dominance. There have been suggestions for

<sup>30</sup> Sujan R. Chinoy, "China Must Respect Existing Agreements and Refrain from Unilateral Action," *Indian Express*, June 18, 2020 ~ <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/india-china-border-tension-galwan-valley-lac-violence-army-sujan-r-chinoy-6463939>.

<sup>31</sup> Sujan R. Chinoy, "Time to Leverage the Strategic Potential of Andaman & Nicobar Islands," Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, June 26, 2020 ~ <https://idsa.in/policybrief/strategic-potential-andaman-nicobar-sujanchinoy-260620>.

<sup>32</sup> Rahul Singh, "8 Indian, U.S. Warships Conduct Maritime Drills in Indian Ocean," *Hindustan Times*, July 21, 2020 ~ <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/8-indian-us-warships-conduct-maritime-drills-in-indian-ocean/story-WwAcU0FyKbrwcJLr05aGP.html>.



coordinated surveillance of the Malacca, Sunda, Lombok, and Ombai-Wetar Straits through the collaborative use of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Australia's Cocos (Keeling) Islands.<sup>33</sup> There have also been recommendations for collaborative antisubmarine warfare efforts in the Indian Ocean, in which the Andaman and Nicobar Islands could play a critical role.<sup>34</sup>

Recent tensions and disputes between India and China have revealed two things: first, China is bent on defining its rise through unilateralism; and second, India remains resolute in defending its sovereignty and territorial integrity. As the next chapters of the Indo-Pacific saga unfold in the South and East China Seas, India will continue to play a critical role in opposing China's unilateralism and aggression.

#### THE WAY AHEAD: OPPORTUNITIES IN A POST-PANDEMIC WORLD

The Indo-Pacific region is destined for further change, especially since the outlines of the post-pandemic era are far from clear. The pandemic has shown how China's actions can affect the entire world. The decoupling of global value chains, trade, and investment flows in the Indo-Pacific will remain a quandary for the United States and many other countries. Over time, these have consolidated into well-entrenched regional networks, especially in East and Southeast Asia between China, Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, and the ASEAN countries. Even as trade and technology are being weaponized, there is little doubt that the world is rapidly cleaving itself into mutually exclusive camps. A coalition against China is emerging in the Indo-Pacific through the proposed "D-10 Club" summit (featuring G-7 members plus India, Australia, and South Korea), with the objective of preventing Chinese monopolies on 5G and other critical technologies.<sup>35</sup>

However, the rapid spread of coronavirus has also created fresh opportunities for dialogue in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond. There is hope, and scope, for creating a new global compact. Contributions will be measured not in dollars and cents but in the leadership that countries exhibit and their willingness to share ideas, best practices, and available resources to develop an international mechanism for monitoring, verification, early

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<sup>33</sup> Chinoy, "Time to Leverage the Strategic Potential of Andaman & Nicobar Islands."

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Erik Brattberg and Ben Judah, "Forget the G-7, Build the D-10," *Foreign Policy*, June 10, 2020 ~ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/06/10/g7-d10-democracy-trump-europe>.

warning, and cooperation among nation-states to deal with pandemics. Together, nations can address the real global challenges, such as climate change, clean energy, protection of the environment, terrorism, and cybersecurity. This is true of the Indo-Pacific as well.

New partnerships and strong leadership will also be needed to address traditional security challenges in the region. A shift is visible in the U.S. position on the South China Sea, for example. In 2016, when the UNCLOS tribunal gave its ruling, the United States spoke only of core principles and the binding nature of the award.<sup>36</sup> At the time, it did not take a stand on the case's merits.<sup>37</sup> In contrast, today the United States has openly aligned its position with the substance of the decision, rejecting China's spurious claims, as evident in Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's July 2020 statement.<sup>38</sup> This will strengthen the resolve of all ASEAN countries that are party to disputes in the South China Sea.

Joint exercises could be expanded in the future. The Malabar exercise between the United States, India, and Japan will most likely include Australia in its next iteration. The format could be further expanded to include Singapore, which was part of the one-off 2007 Quad maritime exercise. Indonesia is another potential invitee. Likewise, the Quad could be further strengthened if the United States, Japan, and Australia were to expressly support India, the only member with land borders with China, in the rejection of its northern neighbor's claims to Indian territory. The other members should make the necessary cartographic changes in their maps of India.<sup>39</sup> In the absence of unequivocal support from Quad partners for its territorial integrity, India can hardly be expected to significantly step up its commitments and involve itself in maritime contestations beyond the Malacca Strait.

Developing dialogue structures beyond the Quad is crucial for the emergence of a stable security architecture in the Indo-Pacific. The Quad Plus format makes the structure more inclusive and acceptable, and Quad members have already carried out naval exercises with others in the region. India has

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<sup>36</sup> John Kirby, "Decision in the Philippines-China Arbitration," U.S. Bureau of Public Affairs, July 12, 2016 ~ <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/07/259587.htm>; and "Background Briefing on South China Sea Arbitration," U.S. Office of the Spokesperson, Special Briefing, July 12, 2016 ~ <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/07/259976.htm>.


<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Michael R. Pompeo, "U.S. Position on Maritime Claims in the South China Sea," U.S. Department of State, Press Statement, July 13, 2020 ~ <https://www.state.gov/u-s-position-on-maritime-claims-in-the-south-china-sea>.

<sup>39</sup> Chinoy, "Time to Leverage the Strategic Potential of Andaman & Nicobar Islands."

exercised with the Philippines, Japan, and the United States, while Vietnam has exercised with Australia, Japan, and the United States. During the pandemic, Quad members have engaged in regular consultations, which have expanded to include Vietnam, South Korea, New Zealand, Israel, and Brazil.

China is keen to ensure that the Quad does not evolve from a regional coordinating mechanism focused on capacity-building and developmental partnerships into an “Asian NATO.” As far as the future of the format, however, much will depend on China’s actions and their impact on the regional security environment.

For the foreseeable future, the Indian Ocean and the country’s land borders will remain first order concerns in India’s national security paradigm. New Delhi will continue to invest, though, in working with like-minded partners in the Quad and Quad Plus formats to ensure a free, open, and rules-based order, with freedom of navigation and overflight, throughout the Indo-Pacific. 

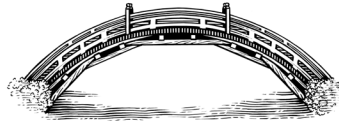


ROUNDTABLE ESSAY

# Indonesia's Indo-Pacific Vision: Staying the Course in a Covid-19 World

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*Natalie Sambhi*



**NATALIE SAMBHI** is Executive Director of Verve Research and a PhD scholar focused on Indonesian military history at the Australian National University's Strategic and Defence Studies Centre (Australia). She can be reached at <[natalie@ververesearch.org](mailto:natalie@ververesearch.org)>.

**KEYWORDS:** INDONESIA; U.S.-CHINA COMPETITION; MARITIME SECURITY; FREE AND OPEN INDO-PACIFIC; COVID-19

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This essay examines the evolution of Indonesia's Indo-Pacific thinking, major developments since the election of President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) in 2014, and the future of the country's regional leadership amid new 21st-century challenges, particularly Covid-19.

### MAIN ARGUMENT

Indonesia's outlook as a maritime state has matured over the past decade. Under the Jokowi government, important shifts have occurred in the country's thinking about the Indo-Pacific with implications for maritime policy. In particular, Jokowi has shown a greater focus during his second term on establishing a material legacy—including by upgrading infrastructure, developing human resources, boosting lagging economic growth, and relocating the capital—rather than a visionary one. While Indonesia's relentless pursuit of multilateralism is necessary to promote regional cooperation and balance strategic rivalry, much of the administration's attention has been diverted to addressing the economic fallout and public health pressures of the Covid-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, Indonesia's concerted effort to be an active regional player, given its size and historical nonalignment, remains critical.

### POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- The current Covid-19 crisis and heightened strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific in recent years mean that Indonesia will continue to strenuously pursue multilateralism to balance the influence of both the U.S. and China and to maximize stability and scientific cooperation.
- Slowing economic growth and increased strain on the country's health system due to the pandemic will limit some of Jokowi's goals for his second term. Yet, given the country's centrality to the Indo-Pacific construct and the importance of maritime security for the archipelago, the administration cannot afford to divert its focus from the Indo-Pacific.
- Indonesia's failure to develop a coherent response to Indo-Pacific maritime security issues can be traced back to the militarization of its foreign policy. This trend is unlikely to change during the president's second term, given the prominence of former army generals as advisers in the cabinet.

As a maritime construct conjoining two oceans, the term “Indo-Pacific” is relatively new in strategic language, reflecting important yet irreversible shifts in power and influence across the Asian continent and its surrounding waters. Indonesia lies at the heart of this construct, as the maritime crossroads connecting west and east, between the continents of Asia and Australia. Moreover, the country is an archipelago. Despite this, Indonesia has only recently started thinking about and developing policies about its maritime identity, concomitant with its desire to play a pivotal role in the region. Indonesia’s centrality in the Indo-Pacific, however, can be a double-edged sword. It can attract greater interest and investment from other states but at the same time raise expectations that the country will assume greater responsibility.<sup>1</sup> Given Indonesia’s desire for the region to not be dominated by any one state, part of this responsibility includes promoting its own vision for the Indo-Pacific. To this end, Indonesia has been busy spearheading initiatives, such as the 2019 ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific.

If strategic competition, instability risk, lagging economic growth, rapid technological change, demographic shifts, and climate change pressures were not enough, the Indo-Pacific is now under greater strain with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. By the end of September 2020, Indonesia had some 278,722 confirmed cases and 10,473 deaths, with an average of nearly 4,000 new cases per day.<sup>2</sup> Indonesia’s concerted leadership of the region might be desirable from Jakarta’s perspective, but much of its attention is—and will continue to be—diverted to the public health crisis affecting its nearly 270 million citizens. This essay examines the evolution of Indonesia’s Indo-Pacific thinking, major developments since the election of Joko Widodo (Jokowi) in 2014, and the future of the country’s regional leadership amid new 21st-century challenges. It is organized as follows:

- ≈ p. 40 describes the development of Indonesia’s concept of the Indo-Pacific based on the country’s history and geographic position.
- ≈ pp. 41–45 look at relevant events and policies during Jokowi’s first presidential term, including his Global Maritime Fulcrum vision, and assess his desire to show Indonesian strength and sovereignty in maritime affairs, particularly vis-à-vis China and illegal fishing.

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<sup>1</sup> Natalie Sambhi, “The Free and Open Indo-Pacific and the Quad as Seen from Australia and Indonesia,” in *U.S.-Japan Alliance Conference: Regional Perspectives on the Quadrilateral Dialogue and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific*, ed. Scott W. Harold, Tanvi Madan, and Natalie Sambhi (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2020), 23–35, 32.

<sup>2</sup> “Jumlah kasus di Indonesia saat ini” [Total Current Cases in Indonesia], KawalCOVID19 ≈ <https://kawalcovid19.id>; and “The Coronavirus in Asia and ASEAN—Live Updates by Country,” Dezan Shira and Associates, ASEAN Briefing, August 13, 2020 ≈ <https://www.aseanbriefing.com/news/coronavirus-asia-asean-live-updates-by-country>.

- ≈ pp. 45–50 examine shifts so far in Jokowi’s second term to advance a more domestically inclined agenda and manage the Covid-19 pandemic.
- ≈ p. 50 addresses the future prospects and potential of Indonesia as an Indo-Pacific leader and cooperative partner in a multipolar world.

## ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF INDONESIA’S INDO-PACIFIC THINKING

As an important nation for maritime-borne trade, Indonesia has a long history of thinking about its place between two oceans. The 1957 Djuanda Declaration, which asserted the baselines and boundaries of Indonesia as an archipelagic state, was an important declaration of sovereignty in its waters and was successfully adopted into the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in 1982. But despite the concerted government effort on this matter, the declaration was largely domestically oriented. Much of Indonesia’s post-independence foreign policy and strategy concerned promoting domestic economic growth and addressing internal conflict, leading to an entrenched, inward-looking, and land-based focus rather than an outward, maritime vision. Additionally, since the Sukarno era (1945–67), Indonesia has promoted its foreign policy identity as being nonaligned (despite *de facto* alignment with the West during Suharto’s rule from 1968 to 1998) and “free and active,” eschewing formal alliances and promoting ties with the global South. Some of the legacies of this strategic autonomy continue to infuse foreign and strategic policy thinking today.

Against this history, Indonesia’s more explicit thinking about the Indo-Pacific began during the Yudhoyono administration (2004–14), particularly in the president’s second term when Marty Natalegawa served as foreign minister. Natalegawa was not only an early adopter of the Indo-Pacific term, but in a 2013 speech he argued that the region was characterized by a “strategic triangle” with India, Japan, and Australia at its corners and Indonesia at its heart.<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, he did not describe the United States or China as important poles of the construct. Natalegawa also championed the creation and adoption of an Indo-Pacific treaty as a normative framework based on the principles of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. In his view, a treaty was necessary to keep in check increasing geopolitical instability and a sharpening rivalry between emerging powers, particularly in the maritime domain.

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<sup>3</sup> Marty M. Natalegawa, “An Indonesian Perspective on the Indo-Pacific” (speech at the Conference on Indonesia, Washington, D.C., May 16, 2013).



## JOKOWI'S FIRST TERM

Following the election of Jokowi, Indonesia's thinking about the Indo-Pacific was inextricably linked to the president's Global Maritime Fulcrum idea. Inherently domestically focused, this vision aimed to restore Indonesia's former glory as a maritime nation by emphasizing several maritime sectors. These included boosting maritime defense, protecting fisheries and the maritime environment, encouraging maritime tourism, and improving archipelagic connectivity via investment in maritime infrastructure such as ports.<sup>4</sup> Much like Natalegawa, Jokowi envisioned Indonesia as a strategic axis of the Indo-Pacific system. Despite the domestic emphasis of Jokowi's vision, regional commentators enthusiastically interpreted his ambitions as a sign that Indonesia would "step up" and play a larger role in building regional architecture and strengthening norms.

Jokowi showed a strong, early commitment to his vision, selecting key figures for strategic portfolios such as Susi Pudjiastuti as minister of marine affairs and fisheries, whose business focus had been on goods transportation by air and sea. Given the vulnerability of Indonesian fish stocks to illegal fishing by foreign vessels, she was tasked with enforcing a deterrent policy that would sink any captured trespassing ships. These efforts went hand in hand with other early boosts to improve maritime surveillance and the consolidation of the Indonesian Maritime Security Agency (BAKAMLA) in 2014. Indonesia's navy and air force upgrades were also to continue as part of the military's modernization plan, known as the Minimum Essential Force, initiated by Jokowi's predecessor.

Yet Jokowi's desire to enforce a policy that countered illegal fishing encapsulated some of the early tensions between Indonesia's interests in protecting its seas and its relations with increasingly more powerful Indo-Pacific states such as China. To fund his first-term infrastructure upgrades, Jokowi sought FDI from multiple sources, including Beijing. As is the case for many Indo-Pacific nations, Indonesia's largest trading partner is China, with two-way trade valued at \$72.6 billion in 2018.<sup>5</sup> Under Susi, the policy to sink encroaching vessels was notoriously high-profile, with her

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<sup>4</sup> Jokowi presented an early formulation of the Global Maritime Fulcrum at the East Asia Summit. See Robertus Wardi, "Ini doktrin Jokowi di KTT Asia timur" [This Is Jokowi's Doctrine at the East Asia Summit], *BeritaSatu*, November 13, 2014 ~ <http://www.beritasatu.com/nasional/224809-ini-doktrin-jokowi-di-ktt-asia-timur.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Apriza Pinandita, "Indonesia, China to Strengthen Strategic Partnership in 2020," *Jakarta Post*, December 17, 2019 ~ <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2019/12/17/indonesia-china-to-strengthen-strategic-partnership-in-2020.html>.

inviting several media outlets and parodying the matter on social media. By the end of her term, the ministry had sunk 556 illegal vessels, but only 3 had been from China.<sup>6</sup> This small figure was unusual given the number of Chinese fishing vessels in Indonesia's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in recent years.

The policy created tensions between ministers on how to handle China. Serving as coordinating minister for political, legal, and security affairs and coordinating minister for maritime affairs at different times during Jokowi's first term, Luhut Pandjaitan, a close associate of the president, criticized the policy for needlessly antagonizing diplomatic relations, arguing that the boats could be repurposed for Indonesian use.<sup>7</sup> Luhut's objections have been perceived by some analysts as protecting Chinese investment in Indonesia for which he is responsible.<sup>8</sup> In May 2015, China's foreign ministry expressed "serious concern" about the destruction of a Chinese fishing vessel.<sup>9</sup> While other countries such as Vietnam, Thailand, and Malaysia also protested the policy, the number of destroyed boats from these countries increased steadily over Susi's term.

In 2016, during Jokowi's first term, Indonesia also faced a series of increasingly aggressive Chinese incursions in its waters around the Natuna Islands (after similar incidents in 2013). Beijing claimed "historic rights" there as part of its "nine-dash line," a claim disputed by Indonesia's foreign ministry.<sup>10</sup> As with the policy of destroying illegal fishing vessels, Indonesia's leaders had mixed reactions to China's incursions. Some wanted to adopt a tougher stance, whereas others wanted China to "remain Indonesia's friend."<sup>11</sup> Set against increasingly bold moves by Beijing against rival maritime claimants Vietnam and the Philippines, Indonesia's investment and security

<sup>6</sup> M. Razi Rahman and Genta Tenri Mawa, "Indonesia Has Sunk 556 Illegal Boats: Pudjiastuti," *Antara News*, October 7, 2019 ~ <https://en.antaranews.com/news/134238/indonesia-has-sunk-556-illegal-boats-pudjiastuti>.

<sup>7</sup> "JK, Luhut Argue against Minister Susi's Boat Sinking Strategy," *Tempo*, January 9, 2018 ~ <https://en.tempo.co/read/914696/jk-luhut-argue-against-minister-susis-boat-sinking-strategy>.

<sup>8</sup> John McBeth, "Chinese Fishermen: Off the Hook in Indonesia Now Pudjiastuti's Gone?" *South China Morning Post*, November 24, 2019 ~ <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3038952/chinese-fishermen-hook-indonesia-now-pudjiastutis-gone>; and Aisyah Llewellyn, "Indonesia's Fishy Furore," *Lowy Institute, Interpreter*, April 4, 2018 ~ <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/indonesia-s-fishy-furore>.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Martina and Kanupriya Kapoor, "China Says Concerned over Indonesia's Blowing Up of Fishing Boat," *Reuters*, May 21, 2015 ~ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-indonesia-boats/china-says-concerned-over-indonesias-blowing-up-of-fishing-boat-idUSKBN00613F20150521>.

<sup>10</sup> "Natuna Islands: Indonesia Says No 'Overlapping' South China Sea Claims with China," *ABC News (Australia)*, June 22, 2016 ~ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-06-22/no-overlapping-claims-with-china-in-indonesian-waters-says-fm/7534498?nw=0>.

<sup>11</sup> Evan A. Laksmana, "The Domestic Politics of Jakarta's South China Sea Policy," *Lowy Institute, Interpreter*, April 1, 2016 ~ <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/The-Interpreter/Domestic-Politics-Jakartas-South-China-Sea-Policy>.

dilemma was heightened further. On the one hand, Jakarta desired to continue negotiating a code of conduct between the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and China that would regulate conduct in the South China Sea. On the other hand, it wanted to find ways to credibly prevent China from bullying its smaller Southeast Asian neighbors. Jakarta thus continued to strike a careful balance between deepening bilateral ties and upholding its sovereign interests through appealing to international law and norms of regional peace and stability.

Thus, Indonesia's Indo-Pacific vision has been shaped fundamentally not just by its foreign policy tenets but by the challenge of balancing its interests while avoiding conflict, particularly with and between larger states. As such, a central element of its policy is that Indonesia does not wish to see the region dominated by any one state. As one analyst put it: "Neither Pax Americana nor Pax Sinica is Indonesia's preferred future for the Indo-Pacific."<sup>12</sup> To this end, the Jokowi administration characterizes the Indo-Pacific by "cooperation, not rivalry, inclusiveness, transparency and openness."<sup>13</sup> From Jakarta's perspective, escalating strategic rivalry between the United States and China (and to a lesser degree between China and India) is destabilizing. To this end, Indonesia is cautious about actions that antagonize Indo-Pacific states. In particular, U.S.-led conceptions of the free and open Indo-Pacific and the Quad grouping between Australia, India, Japan, and the United States are seen by Jakarta as needlessly provocative and a form of proxy containment of China. Perceiving the Quad as inconsistent with its foreign policy tenets of being free and active as well as nonaligned have meant little appetite for quasi-alliances.<sup>14</sup> This is especially the case when the grouping appears to be U.S.-ally heavy in direct opposition to the region's other strategic competitor. Statements of "inclusiveness" have been critical for Jakarta in promoting an Indo-Pacific vision that fosters cooperation and minimizes antagonism.

Given Indonesia's desire to resist an Indo-Pacific dominated by U.S. or Chinese interests, the country has spearheaded several diplomatic initiatives that promote the second element of its vision: ASEAN centrality. For example, during the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Retreat in February 2018, Indonesia promoted the principles of ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation

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<sup>12</sup> Evan A. Laksmana, "Australia's Strategic Appetite Should Take More Account of Indonesia," East Asia Forum, July 19, 2020 ~ <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2020/07/19/australias-strategic-appetite-should-take-more-account-of-indonesia>.

<sup>13</sup> "Indo-Pacific Cooperation Concept Focuses on Cooperation, Not Rivalry: President Jokowi," Cabinet Secretariat (Indonesia), Press Release, November 15, 2018 ~ <https://setkab.go.id/en/indo-pacific-cooperation-concept-focuses-on-cooperation-not-rivalry-president-jokowi>.

<sup>14</sup> Sambhi, "The Free and Open Indo-Pacific and the Quad as Seen from Australia and Indonesia," 34.

in Southeast Asia and the 2011 Declaration of the East Asia Summit on the Principles for Mutually Beneficial Relations (also known as the Bali Principles) as pillars of the regional architecture.<sup>15</sup> Where ASEAN centrality has appeared in other formulations of the Indo-Pacific, it has been praised. During a September 2018 visit to Washington, for instance, then defense minister Ryamizard Ryacudu reiterated his country's support for the U.S. free and open Indo-Pacific concept, particularly its economic focus, principle of inclusiveness, and promotion of ASEAN's role in the region.<sup>16</sup> Taking these statements one step further, Indonesia pushed for the creation of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, which reiterates the Jokowi administration's idea that ASEAN should lead the creation of an economic and security architecture that integrates the organization's norms into the wider Indo-Pacific.<sup>17</sup> However, this development did not represent a strong commitment to the Indo-Pacific by all states, with Malaysia's foreign minister saying the outlook's adoption was based on pragmatism, not shared ideals.<sup>18</sup>

A third feature of Indonesia's vision is active multipolarity, particularly where maritime issues are concerned. Jakarta has encouraged deepening partnerships with other emerging Indo-Pacific powers such as Japan, Australia, and France. Jokowi has made, in particular, a concerted effort to foster bilateral relations with India, visiting New Delhi in December 2016 and again in January 2018 for the ASEAN-India summit. Many of the agreements signed during his first administration contained more extensive maritime-oriented language and initiatives as well. During a visit by Indian prime minister Narendra Modi to Jakarta in May 2018, the leaders signed the Shared Vision of India-Indonesia Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>19</sup> This was a significant development as the first time either side had used the "Indo-Pacific" as a frame for their bilateral relationship, a normative statement of values on regional governance (again, emphasizing an

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<sup>15</sup> "Press Statement by the Chairman of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Retreat," ASEAN, February 6, 2018 ~ <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Press-Statement-by-the-Chairman-of-the-ASEAN-Foreign-Ministers-Retreat-clean.pdf>.

<sup>16</sup> "Indonesian Minister of Defense in Washington, D.C. to Strengthen Indonesia-U.S. Defense Cooperation," Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia in Washington, D.C., Press Release, September 5, 2018 ~ <http://www.embassyofindonesia.org/index.php/2018/09/05/indonesian-minister-of-defense-in-washington-d-c-to-strengthen-indonesia-us-defense-cooperation>.

<sup>17</sup> Sambhi, "The Free and Open Indo-Pacific and the Quad as Seen from Australia and Indonesia," 32–33.

<sup>18</sup> Ben Bland, "In Conversation: Malaysia's Foreign Minister on Great Power Rivalry," Lowy Institute, Interpreter, December 4, 2019 ~ <https://www.loyyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/conversation-malysias-foreign-minister-great-power-rivalry>.

<sup>19</sup> "Shared Vision of India-Indonesia Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific," Ministry of External Affairs (India), Press Release, May 30, 2018 ~ [https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/29933/Shared\\_Vision\\_of\\_IndiaIndonesia\\_Maritime\\_Cooperation\\_in\\_the\\_IndoPacific](https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/29933/Shared_Vision_of_IndiaIndonesia_Maritime_Cooperation_in_the_IndoPacific).

“inclusive Indo-Pacific”), and an outline of a range of concrete collaborative mechanisms such as maritime connectivity and security.<sup>20</sup> This period was also marked by increasing trilateral engagement with India and Australia as well as Indonesia’s chairmanship of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) from 2015 to 2017, during which it hosted the IORA Leaders’ Summit and the IORA Ministerial Blue Economy Conference.

### JOKOWI’S SECOND TERM AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Indonesia’s perception of the Indo-Pacific during Jokowi’s second administration will be shaped by an even more intense U.S.-China rivalry, a greater number of self-declared Indo-Pacific players like the United Kingdom and France, and the public health and economic challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic. While it is still early in Jokowi’s second term, there have already been some important shifts.

The first is that Jokowi is now concentrating on his domestic legacy in material terms, particularly upgrading infrastructure, developing human resources, boosting lagging economic growth, and relocating the capital.<sup>21</sup> This sits in stark contrast with his predecessor, who was far more ambitious in foreign policy during his second term, expanding Indonesia’s identity as an active diplomatic player in ASEAN, the G-20, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and the United Nations. The Global Maritime Fulcrum slogan has now disappeared from Jokowi’s public lexicon, suggesting a more modest focus on tangible rather than visionary gains. As previously mentioned, Indonesia’s emphasis on certain elements of this maritime vision in the past five years inevitably oriented domestic infrastructure and economic policies, not to mention public awareness, toward the maritime domain. This attention will continue in Jokowi’s second term, if only by virtue of the policies already put in place.

A second, related shift is a more indirect approach by the president to foreign affairs and security, which began before the pandemic. Minister of Foreign Affairs Retno Marsudi has been invited to stay on for another

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<sup>20</sup> Natalie Sambhi, “Indonesia-India Relations in the Indo-Pacific,” in *Expanding Horizons: Indonesia’s Regional Engagement in the Indo-Pacific Era*, ed. Jeffrey Wilson (Perth: Perth USAsia Centre, 2018), 47–58, 53.

<sup>21</sup> Since Covid-19 surged in Indonesia, decisions regarding the capital’s relocation have been put on hold, according to the coordinating minister for maritime affairs and investment, Luhut Pandjaitan, in mid-April. Marchio Irfan Gorbiano and Dzulfikar Fathur Rahman, “Jokowi’s Capital Relocation Dream Faces Covid-19 Hurdle,” *Jakarta Post*, April 14, 2020 ≈ <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/04/14/jokowis-capital-relocation-dream-faces-covid-19-hurdle.html>.

five years, allowing for continuity in approach and personality, while Jokowi has used the defense portfolio as a bargaining chip and appointed his two-time presidential-election opponent and former army general Prabowo Subianto as defense minister. It is better to have a potential spoiler within his camp, since Jokowi can exploit Prabowo's military background for necessary expertise in an area that is not his forte. Thus far, Prabowo has shown himself committed to achieving the third phase of the Minimum Essential Force military modernization program by 2024, particularly in regard to purchasing fighter jets. Nevertheless, while the domestic political ramifications of this appointment have yet to play out, Prabowo's involvement in the cabinet means that he will directly influence how Indonesia positions itself strategically within the Indo-Pacific.

In fact, Indonesia's handling of a recent maritime confrontation with China has given early indications of how the second Jokowi administration will respond to security challenges in the Indo-Pacific. Between December 11, 2019, and January 11, 2020, dozens of Chinese vessels entered Indonesia's EEZ near the Natuna Islands. Between December 19 and 24, Indonesia's coast guard reported 63 fishing boats accompanied by two China Coast Guard vessels in its waters.<sup>22</sup> The deployment of the BAKAMLA vessel KN *Tanjung Datu* on December 19 appeared to have only a limited deterrent effect, with Chinese vessels continuing to move in and out of Indonesia's EEZ.<sup>23</sup> On December 30, Indonesia issued a protest regarding a China Coast Guard vessel in the country's waters but did not disclose the date of the violation.<sup>24</sup> Once the issue became public, the president ordered the "largest-ever deployment" to the waters around the Natuna Islands, including six hundred troops, four frigates, a submarine, four fighter jets, two naval corvettes, and a Boeing 737 maritime patrol aircraft.<sup>25</sup> On January 6, the coordinating minister for political, legal, and security affairs Mohammad Mahfud called on fishermen from other parts

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<sup>22</sup> "Gone Fishing: Tracking China's Flotilla from Brunei to Indonesia," Center for Strategic and International Studies, Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, January 30, 2020 ~ <https://amti.csis.org/gone-fishing-tracking-chinas-flotilla-from-brunei-to-indonesia>.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Fadli, "Indonesia Issues Protest to Beijing over Chinese Vessel Trespassing in Natuna," *Jakarta Post*, December 31, 2019 ~ <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2019/12/31/indonesia-issues-protest-to-beijing-over-chinese-vessel-trespassing-in-natuna.html>.

<sup>25</sup> Ridzwan Rahmat, "Indonesia Sends More Warships, Submarine to Natuna as China Backs Down," *Janes*, January 10, 2020 ~ <https://www.janes.com/defence-news/news-detail/indonesia-sends-more-warships-submarine-to-natuna-as-china-backs-down>; and Ridzwan Rahmat, "Indonesia Makes Largest-Ever Deployment of Troops, Equipment to South China Sea Island," *Janes*, January 6, 2020 ~ <https://www.janes.com/defence-news/news-detail/indonesia-makes-largest-ever-deployment-of-troops-equipment-to-south-china-sea-island>.

of the archipelago to travel to the islands as part of a maritime militia.<sup>26</sup> The Chinese vessels began withdrawing on January 11, a few days after Jokowi visited the Natuna Islands.

Not only does this incident demonstrate the limits of Indonesia's coast guard and military capabilities in responding to China's incursions, but it also has exposed the government's inability to respond coherently to security threats. While the foreign minister preferred a limited, legal approach by reiterating the terms of UNCLOS, the president and military favored a more muscular one, and other senior officials were more ambivalent. Both Minister of Defence Prabowo Subianto and Coordinating Minister for Maritime Affairs Luhut only cautiously criticized China.<sup>27</sup> Since then, Indonesia has continued to apprehend illegal fishing vessels but also has pushed hard to address China's moves via concerted diplomacy.

As a non-claimant in the South China Sea, Indonesia has issued two diplomatic notes to China since December 2019. The second note in June 2020, affirming that "Indonesia is not bound by any claims made in contravention to international law" and that China's historic nine-dash line claim "clearly lacks international legal basis," is the first time Indonesia has actively pushed back on China's claims, a stronger position than its previously "neutral" stance after The Hague's 2016 ruling.<sup>28</sup> But these activities demonstrate the upper limits of what Indonesia can achieve. As Evan Laksmana and Ristian Supriyanto have argued, the lack of serious institutionalization of maritime policies during Suharto's New Order (1966–98) has hindered the development of an "archipelagic foreign policy" and a more outward-looking strategy during the Jokowi era.<sup>29</sup>

One of the main reasons for a lack of entrenched maritime thinking in Indonesia has been the militarization of foreign policy.<sup>30</sup> This historical aspect of the New Order has seen a partial resurgence during Jokowi's time through

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<sup>26</sup> "Go Fish: Indonesian Fishermen Urged to Sail to North Natuna Sea Amid China's Territorial Claim," *Jakarta Globe*, January 6, 2020 ~ <https://jakartaglobe.id/news/go-fish-indonesian-fishermen-urged-to-sail-to-north-natuna-sea-amid-chinas-territorial-claim>.

<sup>27</sup> Francisca Christy, "Natuna Waters Issue, Prabowo: China Is a Friend Country," *Tempo*, trans. Mahinda Arkyasa, January 4, 2020 ~ <https://en.tempo.co/read/1291080/natuna-waters-issue-prabowo-china-is-a-friend-country>.

<sup>28</sup> Dian Septiari, "Indonesia Joins Neighbors in Protesting Beijing's Claims in South China Sea," *Jakarta Post*, June 1, 2020 ~ <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/06/01/indonesia-joins-neighbors-in-protesting-beijings-claims-in-south-china-sea.html>; and Aristyo Rizka Darmawan and Arie Afriansyah, "Gauging Indonesia's Interests in the South China Sea," *East Asia Forum*, June 26, 2020 ~ <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2020/06/26/gauging-indonesias-interests-in-the-south-china-sea>.

<sup>29</sup> Evan A. Laksmana and Ristian A. Supriyanto, "Abandoned at Sea: The Tribunal Ruling and Indonesia's Missing Archipelagic Foreign Policy," *Asian Politics and Policy* 10, no. 2 (2018): 300–321.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 312–13.

the presence of former army generals in several portfolios in his advisory team and close circle of associates.<sup>31</sup> Five ministers in Jokowi's second-term cabinet are former army or police generals.<sup>32</sup> The current head of the National Agency for Disaster Management, Lieutenant General Doni Monardo, is also chief of Indonesia's Coronavirus Disease Response Acceleration Task Force.<sup>33</sup> Socialized during the New Order and with land-based operational experiences, many of these figures prioritize the need for internal security, a land-based strategic culture, and a preference for military personnel. Though Indonesia does face a number of internal security challenges, shoring up its external defenses and directing its diplomatic efforts would promote even greater regional cooperation on maritime pollution or fish stocks. Indonesia's foreign ministry thinks innovatively on the Indo-Pacific, but as demonstrated by the Natuna Islands incident in December 2019–January 2020, the foreign minister's voice is one among many vying for the president's ear. As long as its maritime policy continues to be influenced in this way, Indonesia is unlikely to provide the maritime leadership the Indo-Pacific requires.

The public health pressures of Covid-19 also limit the ways in which Indonesia can be a fully active maritime leader in the Indo-Pacific, as the pandemic is using up resources. While it has had some success in promoting maritime cooperation, such as maritime security patrols with Malaysia and the Philippines, Jakarta has been grappling with surging cases of Covid-19. Indonesia's maritime defense capability will also be constrained after the defense budget was cut twice in 2020, down from nearly \$10 billion in 2019 to \$8.12 billion.<sup>34</sup> As these costs will not come out of the personnel budget, which accounts for most defense spending, one analyst says it is likely that capability projects will be re-evaluated or delayed.<sup>35</sup> With the army extensively deployed during the pandemic, budget cuts could also come from the navy and air force. As Alban Sciascia and Anastasia Febiola Sumarauw argue, the

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<sup>31</sup> Jokowi's chief of staff is the former military chief, retired army general Moeldoko.

<sup>32</sup> These are Prabowo Subianto (army), minister for defense; Luhut Pandjaitan (army), coordinating minister for maritime affairs and investment; Fachrul Razi (army), minister for religion; Terawan Agus Putranto (army), minister for health; and Tito Karnavian (police), minister for internal affairs.

<sup>33</sup> While there is a strong military presence in the country's Covid-19 response, it is not unusual for the military to play a prominent domestic role, and this does not represent a stark decline in civil-military relations. See Natalie Sambhi, "Has Covid Re-Militarized Indonesia?" *Diplomat*, August 1, 2020 ~ <https://thediplomat.com/2020/07/has-covid-re-militarized-indonesia>.

<sup>34</sup> In 2020, two revisions have been made to the defense budget in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The second was Presidential Regulation (Perpres) no. 72/2020, which cut the Defense Ministry's budget to 117.9 trillion rupiahs (\$8.12 billion) from the 122.44 trillion rupiahs set previously in Perpres no. 54/2020. See Marchio Irfan Gorbiano, "Defense Budget Could Be Casualty of Covid-19," *Jakarta Post*, July 6, 2020 ~ <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/07/05/defense-budget-could-be-casualty-of-covid-19.html>.

<sup>35</sup> Curie Maharani interview in *ibid*.



navy is currently underutilized in the Covid-19 response. Indonesia could use the navy to develop hospital ship capacities, giving the military assets to also deploy in diplomatic health initiatives in the future.<sup>36</sup>

While Indonesia is constrained in providing Indo-Pacific leadership in security, the country can still play a role in spearheading cooperation and consensus on maritime law, environmental protection, and economic development. Despite lacking an adequate maritime deterrent against China, as well as an appetite for armed confrontation, Indonesia is well-positioned as a nonaligned archipelagic nation to keep pressure on adherence to international law. Although legal instruments have limits as well, these efforts align with Jakarta's interests in keeping the Indo-Pacific stable. Given that Indonesia is the largest state in ASEAN and a non-claimant state in the South China Sea, the country's voice of protest is vital in encouraging greater consensus to respect international law, even if it remains challenging to keep ties with Beijing on an even keel.

Covid-19 has also provided Indonesia a greater role in pushing for health and scientific cooperation and maritime economic recovery. Thus far, Indonesia has used its prominent position in key bodies such as the Ministerial Coordination Group on Covid-19 and IORA to focus on vaccine research and the availability of medical treatment and protective equipment. At an IORA Committee of Senior Officials meeting in May 2020, the Indonesian representative, Desra Percaya, who is director general of Asia, Pacific, and Africa in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said that IORA had an important role to play in encouraging maritime sectors, such as fisheries, aquaculture, and marine tourism, to help small and medium-sized enterprises recover.<sup>37</sup> Such statements could be supported with future policy initiatives. Indonesia has recently been elected as a member of the UN Economic and Social Council for 2021–23, alongside Japan and Solomon Islands from the Asia-Pacific Group.<sup>38</sup> As the only Southeast Asian representative, Indonesia can take a leadership

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<sup>36</sup> Alban Sciascia and Anastasia Febiola Sumarauw, "Indonesian Navy May Be Forgotten Asset in Pandemic," *Jakarta Post*, April 25, 2020 ~ <https://www.thejakartapost.com/academia/2020/04/25/indonesian-navy-may-be-forgotten-asset-in-pandemic.html>.

<sup>37</sup> "Indonesia Encourages Partnership in the Indian Ocean Region to Fight Covid-19," Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Indonesia), Press Release, May 21, 2020 ~ <https://kemlu.go.id/portal/en/read/1322/berita/indonesia-encourages-partnership-in-the-indian-ocean-region-to-fight-covid-19>.

<sup>38</sup> "Elected as Member of the UN Economic and Social Council, Indonesia to Push for Global Recovery within the 2030 SDGs Framework," Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Indonesia), Press Release, June 18, 2020 ~ <https://kemlu.go.id/portal/en/read/1390/berita/elected-as-member-of-the-un-economic-and-social-council-indonesia-to-push-for-global-recovery-within-the-2030-sdgs-framework>.

role to promote consensus on areas of sustainable development, particularly those which prioritize economic recovery from the pandemic.

## FUTURE PROSPECTS

With economic growth down from 5% to 3% per annum—the lowest rate since 2001—Indonesia will be stretched thin in dealing with non-public health issues.<sup>39</sup> Despite the challenges of Covid-19, however, it is unlikely that Indonesia will radically change its Indo-Pacific philosophy in coming years. For one, Jokowi has been elected to serve until October 2024, which affords some continuity if figures like Minister of Foreign Affairs Retno Marsudi stay on. The other impetus for actively shaping regional norms is uncertainty about the United States' ability or will to remain engaged in the region. As the nation worst affected by the pandemic, and with plans to withdraw troops from Europe and other gestures of retrenchment, the United States appears to be on the decline in the eyes of the region. Indo-Pacific states are still looking for ways to balance the influence of China. Other regional stakeholders, such as India, Japan, and even France, will have their hands full with their respective public health crises and economic recovery plans. As such, multipolarity and multilateralism appear to be the most attractive forms of regional stability and cooperation, as well as being useful for promoting urgent scientific cooperation.

Indonesia will continue to be well-placed to advance regional initiatives, given its long history of nonalignment and de facto leadership of Southeast Asia. As Australian foreign minister Marise Payne made clear in a recent speech, regional partners are calling for a strengthening of Indo-Pacific multilateralism.<sup>40</sup> In other words, U.S. leadership is not assured and excess Chinese influence is not welcome.<sup>41</sup> To this end, Indonesia's voice in promoting multilateral initiatives within the Indo-Pacific is critical. ♦

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<sup>39</sup> "Indonesia Economic Prospects: The Long Road to Recovery," World Bank, July 2020, 1 ~ <http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/804791594826869284/pdf/Indonesia-Economic-Prospects-The-Long-Road-to-Recovery.pdf>.

<sup>40</sup> Marise Payne, "Australia and the World in the Time of COVID-19" (speech at the National Security College, Australian National University, Canberra, June 16, 2020) ~ <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/marise-payne/speech/australia-and-world-time-covid-19>.

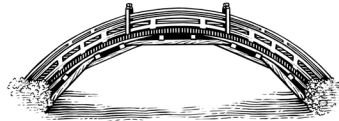
<sup>41</sup> Bradley Wood, "Australia's Vision of Leadership in the Indo-Pacific," East Asia Forum, July 15, 2020 ~ <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2020/07/15/australias-vision-of-leadership-in-the-indo-pacific>.

ROUNDTABLE ESSAY

# Canada and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific: A Strategic Assessment

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*Jeffrey Reeves*



**JEFFREY REEVES** is Vice-President of Research for the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada (Canada). He previously was the Director of Asian Studies at the U.S. Army War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. He can be reached at <[jeff.reeves@asiapacific.ca](mailto:jeff.reeves@asiapacific.ca)>.

**NOTE** ≈ *The views expressed are solely those of the author and not of the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada or any other organization with which he is affiliated.*

**KEYWORDS:** CANADA; REGIONAL ENGAGEMENT; ECONOMICS; SECURITY; NORMS; FREE AND OPEN INDO-PACIFIC; ASIA-PACIFIC

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This essay assesses the strategic implications for Canada of the “free and open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP) vision and argues that, so long as the concept remains exclusionary, Canada can best achieve its national interests through not adopting this construct.

### MAIN ARGUMENT

With the region’s democratic powers lining up behind the ideal of a free and open Indo-Pacific, Canada faces growing pressure to self-identify as a FOIP proponent state. Yet its rationale for alignment with this vision is not clear. Canada lacks a material presence in the Indian Ocean region necessitating an Indo-Pacific geographic redesign. Further, it stands to gain little through normative alignment with an Indo-Pacific vision predicated on exclusion or containment of China in Asia. Neither does Canada need to align with any FOIP concept to deepen its ties with Australia, India, Japan, or the U.S., all countries with which Canada already has extensive economic, security, and societal ties. Rather, Canada should consolidate and further develop its relations with small and middle powers in the Asia-Pacific. Specifically, its involvement with Latin American states and its participation in institutions like the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership present Canada with unrealized opportunity.

### POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Canada must proactively develop an approach to the Asia-Pacific that allows it to achieve its national interests, including expanded state relations, deepened economic engagement, and increased national prestige.
- In rejecting the FOIP constructs, Canada must identify alternative means to engage with Australia, India, Japan, and the U.S.
- Canada will retain its ability to engage with China—a key strategic partner—by remaining outside the FOIP construct.

Successful strategy construction depends on asking the right questions from the start. What, for instance, necessitates a new strategy? What is the strategic end goal? What are the appropriate ways and means by which a state can achieve its strategic objectives? What is the strategy's potential risk? Any good strategist will consider these critical issues upfront. Failure to do so will likely result in a strategy that is unsuitable, unfeasible, and unacceptable.<sup>1</sup>

For Canada, such deliberation should be the starting point when considering whether it should adopt the alternative “Indo-Pacific” geographic region in place of its current “Asia-Pacific” construct, and whether it will align itself with one of the several existing “free and open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP) visions or strategies being promoted. More specifically, Canadian strategists should consider the possible benefits to the country's national interests in the Asia-Pacific (and globally) from strategic bandwagoning with the Indo-Pacific's “proponent states”—used here as shorthand for Australia, India, Japan, and the United States—in relation to the potential costs. Only then should policymakers determine how, when, where, and to what degree Canada should recast itself as an Indo-Pacific nation and align with a FOIP strategy.

This type of critical analysis is, unfortunately, largely absent within Canada's strategic community. Rather, there appears to be a growing consensus among researchers that the country would unquestionably benefit from FOIP alignment. The underlying assumptions informing such analysis are that Canada could strengthen its economic and strategic positions through cooperation with like-minded regional states and that the FOIP frameworks provide the most direct path to do so.

There is, however, scant evidence that FOIP alignment is in Canada's best interests. Far from representing a sophisticated approach to Asia-Pacific affairs, the Indo-Pacific and FOIP constructs represent priorities and worldviews that could weaken Canada's current role in the region. Indeed, upon critical review of Canada's economic, security, and ideational interests in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, there is little to suggest that Canada would benefit from alignment with an Indo-Pacific framework and much to suggest that doing so could actually limit its room for strategic maneuver within Asia.

This essay critically examines the economic, security, and normative rationale for Canada to potentially adopt a FOIP framework in place of its

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<sup>1</sup> J. Boone Bartholomees Jr., “A Survey of the Theory of Strategy,” in *The U.S. Army War College Guide to National Security Policy and Strategy*, ed. J. Boone Bartholomees Jr., 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: Department of National Security and Strategy, 2006), 79.

existing Asia-Pacific one and argues that doing so could cause more harm than benefit. The essay is organized as follows:

- ≈ pp. 54–55 examine Canada’s economic and energy interests in the Indo-Pacific region.
- ≈ pp. 55–57 address Canadian security interests in an expanded Indo-Pacific region.
- ≈ pp. 57–58 consider normative reasons that Canada might opt to sign on to a FOIP vision.
- ≈ pp. 59–63 analyze the pros and cons for Canada to endorse the FOIP concepts proposed by different countries, with particular attention to Japan’s concept.
- ≈ pp. 63–64 conclude by summarizing the reasons that adopting a FOIP framework is not in Canada’s best interests and by emphasizing the value for the country of remaining an Asia-Pacific actor.

#### ECONOMIC INTERESTS

With respect to its economic interests, Canada has little to gain from an Indo-Pacific geographic redesign. Unlike proponent states, Canada is not dependent on energy exports from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and does not stand to benefit directly from greater interregional trade between the Indian and Pacific Ocean regions. In contrast to Japan, in particular, Canada enjoys a high degree of energy autarky. It is the world’s sixth-largest producer of energy, including oil, gas, and uranium, and receives the majority of its energy imports from the United States. Over 89% of its energy exports also go to the United States—an export pattern that indicates huge demand from its neighbor for Canadian natural resources.<sup>2</sup> While diversifying its energy trade and lessening dependence on the U.S. market is in Canada’s interests, the most immediate opportunities for such diversification are with states like South Korea, Japan, and China, all of which are in East Asia.

Neither is it necessary (or helpful) for Canada to adopt an Indo-Pacific outlook to support its overseas energy assets. Canadian firms are more than twice as active in South America (with C\$9.2 billion in energy investment) than in all of Asia, including the Middle East, and over three times more active there than in Africa. Indeed, Canadian energy investment in MENA

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<sup>2</sup> “Energy and the Economy,” Department of Natural Resources (Canada) ≈ <https://www.nrcan.gc.ca/science-data/data-analysis/energy-data-analysis/energy-facts/energy-and-economy/20062>.

has actually declined since 2017, while investment in countries like the United States, Germany, Mexico, and Colombia has increased.<sup>3</sup>


Canada's energy independence—particularly from the MENA region—also means that it has little need to develop enduring trade and transport ties throughout a theoretical Indo-Pacific. For example, Canadian exports to MENA, which consist almost entirely of agricultural goods and seafood, pass through the Atlantic Ocean and Mediterranean Sea rather than the Pacific and Indian Oceans.<sup>4</sup> These export routes are far more direct and secure than those in the Indian Ocean area, meaning there is no trade imperative for Canada to abandon its current geographic focus for an Indo-Pacific redesign. Indeed, Canada's current geographic orientation toward MENA and sub-Saharan Africa, seen in comparison to the FOIP proponent states' reliance on transit through the Indian Ocean region, is a strategic advantage.

Canada does, however, share the FOIP proponent states' view of India as a desirable economic partner. Ottawa has long prioritized the development of Canada-India economic relations—an objective that has taken on even greater urgency since the souring of Canada-China relations in 2019 following Canada's detention of Huawei's Meng Wanzhou in Vancouver and China's responsive (and arbitrary) detention of Michael Spavor and Michael Kovrig in China.<sup>5</sup> There is little to suggest, however, that future ties with India are dependent on Canada adopting an Indo-Pacific vision or a FOIP strategy. New Delhi has not indicated preferential treatment for states that align their foreign policy perspective to its own, nor has Canada's Asia-Pacific approach to the region hampered its ability to engage directly with India. Far from simplifying relations between the two countries, voluntarily overlaying bilateral ties with FOIP concepts would add unnecessary complexity.


## SECURITY RATIONALE

Canada would not benefit from security engagement through the adoption of a FOIP strategy. The Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) have been

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<sup>3</sup> "Canadian Energy Assets, 2018," Department of Natural Resources (Canada)  <https://www.nrcan.gc.ca/science-data/data-analysis/energy-data-analysis/energy-statistics-analysis/canadian-energy-assets/22397>.

<sup>4</sup> Vanessa Hravtin, "Mapping Cargo Ship Routes Around the World," *Canadian Geographic*, May 2, 2016  <https://www.canadiangeographic.ca/article/mapping-cargo-ship-routes-around-world>.

<sup>5</sup> "Strengthening Canada-India Commercial Relationship," Office of the Prime Minister of Canada, Backgrounder, February 20, 2018  <https://pm.gc.ca/en/news/backgrounders/2018/02/20/strengthening-canada-india-commercial-relationship>.

active throughout the Indo-Pacific for decades and, as of 2020, were involved in seven multinational operations in Africa, six in the Middle East, and three in the Asia-Pacific, where CAF works with institutions ranging from the Tunisian Navy to the United Nations and NATO.<sup>6</sup> None of these partnerships depend on Canada's FOIP adoption. In fact, they could even be undermined if Ottawa were to align with what some Asian states view as an exclusionary strategy. One need only examine the CAF's current approach to naval engagement in the Indian and Pacific Ocean regions—outlined below—to see the potential pitfalls around Canadian adoption.

At present, the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) is involved in a number of multinational naval coalitions in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, most notably through Operations Projection and Artemis.<sup>7</sup> Through these operations, the RCN has worked with states in the Asia-Pacific such as Australia, Japan, the United States, Vietnam, and Fiji, as well as with Middle Eastern states such as Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, to conduct combined maritime operations and training.<sup>8</sup> Many of the RCN's missions in support of Operations Projection and Artemis were (and are) a part of U.S.-led coalitions involving U.S. Central Command and U.S. Indo-Pacific Command. Canada's military leadership, however, has made the pragmatic choice not to define operations in line with U.S. FOIP objectives or rhetoric. Whereas the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy calls for freedom of navigation operations in the South and East China Seas to counterbalance Chinese "reversionism," the RCN has specifically rejected the idea of participating in freedom of navigation operations intended to counter China's maritime claims.<sup>9</sup> Through this strategic approach, the CAF has been able to effect its own balancing act between the United States and China.

Rather than find its relationship with the People's Liberation Army Navy problematized over adherence to U.S. FOIP priorities—as is the case with

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<sup>6</sup> "Current Operations List," Department of National Defence (Canada) ~ <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/services/operations/military-operations/current-operations/list.html>.

<sup>7</sup> "Operation Projection," Department of National Defence (Canada) ~ <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/services/operations/military-operations/current-operations/operation-projection.html>.

<sup>8</sup> "HMCS *Calgary* Concludes Operation Projection and Returns to CBF Esquimalt," Department of National Defence (Canada), December 18, 2018 ~ <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/news/2018/12/hmcs-calgary-concludes-operation-projection-and-returns-to-cbf-esquimalt.html>; and "Operation Artemis (Middle Eastern Waters)," Department of National Defence (Canada), April 3, 2020 ~ <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/reports-publications/transition-materials/caf-operations-activities/2020/03/caf-ops-activities/op-artemis-mid-east-waters.html>.

<sup>9</sup> "Canada Sails Warship through Taiwan Strait for Second Time in Three Months," *South China Morning Post*, September 11, 2019 ~ <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3026707/canada-sails-warship-through-taiwan-strait-second-time-three>.



Australia's navy—the RCN still maintains direct and amiable ties with its Chinese counterpart.<sup>10</sup> Beijing has not curtailed Canada's ability to conduct port calls in Hong Kong, despite the RCN's transit of warships through the Taiwan Strait in 2019, which Canadian military leadership refused to define as a freedom of navigation operation. By contrast, Beijing no longer allows the U.S. Navy to port in Hong Kong, citing “unreasonable U.S. practices” as justification.<sup>11</sup> By forgoing strategic alignment with the U.S. FOIP concept, Canada has maintained strategic flexibility and regional relations that allow it greater room to maneuver.

### NORMATIVE RATIONALE

Canada is a steadfast proponent for inclusivity, a rules-based order, and global justice, and the proponent states of the free and open Indo-Pacific have suffused their visions with a normative logic drawn from these values. Yet, as with the economic and security rationales, the benefits for Canada in FOIP alignment are less clear when critically considered in line with the strategy's actual normative assumptions. Far from being an institution founded on ideals, the FOIP's normative components are just as exclusive as they are inclusive and, in many ways, less about values and rules than about fostering strategic alignment.<sup>12</sup>

With respect to democracy, the FOIP proponent states themselves are divided, with India preferring to downplay democracy promotion and the United States zealously raising the issue of democracy protection.<sup>13</sup> Nor have the proponent states clearly articulated their objectives and means for promoting democracy in the Indo-Pacific. They have instead limited their discussions of democratic values to those adopted in their own systems, thereby proving a normative rationale for their FOIP engagement. Japan's “democratic security diamond” and “concert of democracies” concepts are the most salient examples of this attempt at ideological alignment. Yet one

<sup>10</sup> “HMCS *Vancouver* Completes Its Contribution to Operation Projection in Asia-Pacific,” Maple Leaf (Government of Canada), June 28, 2018 ~ <https://ml-fd.caf-fac.ca/en/2018/06/15144>.

<sup>11</sup> “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on December 2, 2019,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, December 2, 2019 ~ [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/2511\\_665403/t1720852.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1720852.shtml).

<sup>12</sup> Axel Berkofsky and Sergio Miracola, eds., *Geopolitics by Other Means: The Indo-Pacific Reality* (Milan: Ledizioni LediPublishing, 2019).

<sup>13</sup> Julie Zauzmer, “Pence: America Will Prioritize Protecting Christians Abroad,” *Washington Post*, May 11, 2017 ~ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2017/05/11/pence-america-will-prioritize-protecting-christians-abroad>.

sees similar references throughout the proponent states' FOIP statements to the importance of aligning with like-minded (i.e., democratic) states.<sup>14</sup> Instead of being a principled framework established to support governance, the FOIP concept is a manifesto for Asia's advanced democracies to work together to shape regional governance institutions in ways that advance their respective interests.<sup>15</sup>

Similarly, there is little in the concept's approach to preserving and strengthening a rules-based order that is compelling upon critical examination. In addition to the proponent states' lack of clarity, there is a clear sense, from the United States in particular, that the rules-based order is essentially shorthand for a continuation of the regional status quo of current governance, laws, and institutions.<sup>16</sup> While the prevailing hub-and-spokes system does have much to commend it, the contemporary and future relevance of the system is less certain, particularly if the principal architects are committed to its preservation at the expense of its evolution.<sup>17</sup>

While Canada can benefit from greater collaboration with the region's advanced democracies and greater involvement in discussions on Asia's rules-based order, the FOIP strategy is not the appropriate vehicle for such activities. As a self-described "alternative" model to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the free and open Indo-Pacific has been defined in largely adversarial terms to both nondemocratic states and states that advocate for new regional institutions to match the region's new power dynamics. Moreover, the strategy's commitment to democracy promotion is taking place at the same time that some Asian states are adopting more mixed-model governments, learning from governance success in China, Malaysia, and Singapore and rejecting the West's democratic models as unable to meet modern-day global challenges, such as the Covid-19 pandemic and the 2008 global financial crisis.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Kharis Templeman, "Democracy under Siege: Advancing Cooperation and Common Values in the Indo-Pacific," Atlantic Council, Issue Brief, January 2020 ~ <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep20700.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> Marian L. Lawson and Susan B. Epstein, "Democracy Promotion: An Objective of U.S. Foreign Assistance," Congressional Research Service, CRS Report for Congress, R44858, January 4, 2019 ~ <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R44858.pdf>.

<sup>16</sup> Carl Ungerer, "Whose Rules? In Which Order?" Australian Institute of International Affairs, Australian Outlook, May 25, 2018 ~ <http://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/whose-rules-in-which-order>.

<sup>17</sup> Richard Menhinick, "'The Rules-Based Global Order': Be Alert and Alarmed," Australia Strategic Policy Institute, Strategist, April 12, 2018 ~ <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/rules-based-global-order-alert-alarmed>.

<sup>18</sup> "New Report: Freedom in the World 2020 Finds Established Democracies Are in Decline," Freedom House, Press Release, March 4, 2020 ~ <https://freedomhouse.org/article/new-report-freedom-world-2020-finds-established-democracies-are-decline>.

CANADA AND THE FREE AND OPEN INDO-PACIFIC:  
HOW TO PROCEED?

While there is not a clear rationale for Canada to adopt an Indo-Pacific geographic ideal, as demonstrated above, there is still value in examining whether the country could best achieve its interests through engagement and, if so, which construct would best support its national aims. Setting aside the question of the relevance of Indo-Pacific framing, the fundamental question then becomes whether Canada stands to benefit from cooperation with Australia, India, Japan, or the United States under a strategic umbrella of the free and open Indo-Pacific.

Among the competing FOIP visions, Canada should be the wariest of the United States' concept, which is predicated on expanded U.S. military hegemony in Asia and aimed at containing China.<sup>19</sup> No other such vision so fully embraces the idea that China is a revisionist actor seeking to upset the regional rules-based order with actions that require a “peace through strength” approach based on a U.S.-led military coalition.<sup>20</sup>

Australia's paradigm also does not offer much for Canada's approach to Asia, as it too has become a largely anti-China strategy under the Morrison administration. While earlier defense and foreign policy white papers identified Asia's changing geopolitical landscape as the driver behind Australia's Indo-Pacific redesign, the *2020 Defence Strategic Update*, in particular, has recast the framework's logic to include the need for deterrence, the challenges of great-power competition, the importance of the U.S. security alliance, and the necessity of managing China's “assertiveness.”<sup>21</sup>

India's FOIP vision, conversely, is far more focused on deepening its ties with states in the Middle East and Southeast Asia—where New Delhi sees particular economic and political opportunities—than on great-power competition. Yet while India's FOIP idea is less confrontational than the U.S. and Australian visions, its value as a strategic concept for Canada is nevertheless questionable. India's vision for the Indo-Pacific comes from its unique geographic position, a need to develop a clear two-ocean and two-continent strategy, and a desire to capitalize on deep historical linkages

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<sup>19</sup> Michael D. Swaine, “A Counterproductive Cold War with China,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 2, 2018 ~ <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-03-02/counterproductive-cold-war-china>.

<sup>20</sup> “President Donald J. Trump's America First Agenda Is Helping to Achieve Peace through Strength,” White House, Press Release, September 25, 2018 ~ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trumps-america-first-agenda-helping-achieve-peace-strength>.

<sup>21</sup> Department of Defence (Australia), *2020 Defence Strategic Update* (Canberra, July 2020), 11 ~ [https://www.defence.gov.au/StrategicUpdate-2020/docs/2020\\_Defence\\_Strategic\\_Update.pdf](https://www.defence.gov.au/StrategicUpdate-2020/docs/2020_Defence_Strategic_Update.pdf).

with the Middle East to realize what India sees as its greater potential on the global stage.<sup>22</sup> While Canada can benefit from greater cooperation with India on a number of fronts, none are dependent on the two countries' alignment under a FOIP strategy.

Of all regional visions, Japan's is, at first glance, the most relevant for Canada as it covers governance, economic development, and security in equal parts. While initially more of a strategic ideal, Tokyo's vision has evolved to become more inclusive and less confrontational—what Yuichi Hosoya has called “FOIP 2.0”—up to and including closer collaboration with China on BRI.<sup>23</sup> The Abe administration's evolution of the concept, in this respect, positioned Japan much closer to the 2019 ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific statement, which emphasizes inclusivity, dialogue, noninterference, and the centrality of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations in any Indo-Pacific strategy.

This raises the critical question of what shape Canadian alignment with Japan's FOIP vision would take aside from a general accord around the two states' shared principles, values, and norms. For Japan's vision to remain appealing to Southeast Asian nations, which the Abe administration identified as a “core interest,” Tokyo must avoid any FOIP operations that lead to institutional development or cause regional instability.<sup>24</sup> Rather, it must be content working within the Asia-Pacific's existing regional architecture and applying the FOIP nomenclature where doing so makes strategic sense for Japan. This suggests that going forward the FOIP concept will be little more than a strategy in name, one that serves to demonstrate Japanese strategic resolve and vision in the region while not antagonizing ASEAN member states.<sup>25</sup>

From this perspective, it is unclear where Canada could operationally engage with Japan on issues of governance or economics outside the institutions that already exist in the Asia-Pacific independent of the FOIP concept. There is currently no FOIP-specific governance institution, and Canada is already represented in regional multilateral forums such

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<sup>22</sup> Manjeet S. Pardesi, “The Indo-Pacific: A ‘New’ Region or the Return of History?” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 74, no. 2 (2020): 124–46.

<sup>23</sup> Yuichi Hosoya, “FOIP 2.0: The Evolution of Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy,” *Asia Pacific Review* 26, no. 1 (2019): 18–28.

<sup>24</sup> Kei Koga, “The Emerging Indo-Pacific Era (Japan–Southeast Asia Relations),” *Comparative Connections* 21, no. 1 (2019): 125–34.

<sup>25</sup> Yukio Tajima, “Abe Softens Tone on Indo-Pacific to Coax China's ASEAN Friends,” *Nikkei Asian Review*, November 13, 2018 ~ <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Abe-softens-tone-on-Indo-Pacific-to-coax-China-s-ASEAN-friends>.

as the G-20 and G-7, both of which are invaluable for the discussion of governance issues and neither of which depends on the FOIP concept for relevance. Canada is also a founding member of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), a regional forum focused on economic governance issues, including trade, economic integration, and structural reform; a member of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), a multilateral free trade agreement (FTA) focused on trade liberalization, tariff elimination, and intellectual property protection; and a director on the boards of both the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Asian Development Bank, two of the Asia-Pacific's premier institutions focused on poverty reduction. Canada has FTAs with South Korea, Chile, and Peru and is in the process of negotiating FTAs with China, ASEAN, Thailand, and the Pacific Alliance. The country also works with the World Bank, the International Finance Corporation, and the International Labour Organization on economic development issues across the region. And although there are clearly areas where Canada could increase its participation in local discussions on governance, both economic and noneconomic, opportunities to do so are primarily within existing institutions and almost exclusively within the ASEAN Plus frameworks that Canada has yet to wholly embrace. Indeed, as member states have prioritized strengthening ASEAN institutions in their Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, Canada should be circumspect in supporting any new regional institutions that could undermine those already established.

Last, alignment with Japan on the FOIP concept is unnecessary for Canada's security relations in the Asia-Pacific, given that neither country's security activities or interests rely on operations in such a framework. With regard to bilateral security relations, the two states already coordinate on security issues through G-7 working groups like the DPRK Sanctions Contact Group and the Non-Proliferation Directors Group. They also work together to support UN Security Council sanctions against North Korea through Operation Neon. In addition, Canada and Japan signed an acquisition and cross-servicing agreement in 2018, allowing for better coordination between their respective armed forces where and when appropriate.<sup>26</sup>

With regard to multilateral security relations, the only benefit Canada might receive from alignment with Japan around the FOIP concept is gaining access to the Quad, which is becoming a U.S. and Australian

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<sup>26</sup> "Canada Announces Closer Collaboration with Japan," Office of the Prime Minister of Canada, Backgrounder, April 28, 2019  <https://pm.gc.ca/en/news/backgrounders/2019/04/28/canada-announces-closer-collaboration-japan>.

FOIP institution. Ironically, however, Japan is increasingly uncomfortable associating the format with the concept. Canada already has close defense relations with Australia, Japan, and the United States; is a part of the Five Eyes intelligence-sharing mechanism, which includes Australia and the United States; and undertakes joint training and operations with three of the FOIP states (excluding India) in the Asia-Pacific. None of these security partnerships are dependent on adherence to a FOIP concept, nor would Canada's acceptance of the concept necessarily guarantee involvement in the Quad.

It is clear that Canada would not materially benefit from FOIP engagement with Japan. Normatively, however, one can make a stronger case for Canadian involvement, particularly as the concept has evolved to reflect regional perspectives and concerns. Like Japan, Canada is committed to freedom and openness across the entire region and international rule of law and order, particularly if such an order is open to the development of new, endogenous institutions that meet a clear regional demand. Like Japan and ASEAN, Canada has prioritized inclusivity and economic development in its Feminist International Assistance Policy toward Asia and around the globe. Canada is also committed to supporting social and economic development and security in the Middle East and Africa, where it already works with the Gulf Cooperation Council, Global Coalition against Daesh, La Francophonie, and the International Syria Support Group on such issues.<sup>27</sup>

Canada is also keenly aware of the importance of middle-power cooperation to achieve its national interests in Asia and could use cooperation with Japan's FOIP concept to further its middle-power engagement in the region. Canada could only use FOIP engagement to this end, however, if it purposefully and clearly articulates the differences between the FOIP vision it accepts and the FOIP visions it rejects. Adherence to the U.S. vision, for instance, would not allow Canada to advance its middle-power position but would rather place it firmly on the U.S. "side" in Asia. Far from advancing its position as a middle power, Canada would find its actions limited and its room for maneuver constrained as a result of this conceptual alliance.

These realities raise two important questions for Canada in its deliberations over whether to conceptually and practically re-engineer its approach to the Asia-Pacific to bring itself in line with FOIP-promoting states. First, can Canada choose which version of the FOIP it

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<sup>27</sup> "Canada and the Middle East and North Africa," Government of Canada ~ [https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/international\\_relations-relations\\_internationales/mena-moan/index.aspx?lang=eng](https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/international_relations-relations_internationales/mena-moan/index.aspx?lang=eng).

aligns with? While the answer to this question is ostensibly yes, practically the answer is no. The Indo-Pacific and the FOIP vision, while complex ideas and concepts to those willing to spend the time to critically disassemble them, are primarily valuable as foreign policy tools that represent perceptions, intentions, and partnerships. For nonparticipating states, there is little difference between the U.S. and Japanese views, particularly as both use the concept as shorthand for bilateral and multilateral engagement in Asia. The dominant U.S. voice on regional issues, together with Japan's continued reference to security as a FOIP pillar (albeit to a lesser extent than before), means that regional states will continue to see the concept as inherently anti-Chinese and intrinsically antagonistic. That a state considering the pros and cons of FOIP engagement can parse the differing interpretations and align only with the components with which it agrees is, therefore, wishful thinking.

Second, does Canada gain anything through normative alignment with the FOIP concept? Here, the answer is also no. While there are clearly laudable aspects in the Japanese FOIP vision and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific in terms of nonaggression, inclusivity, and noninterference, Canada has already demonstrated its commitment to these values through its participation in existing multilateral institutions, many of which are more inclusive than the FOIP vision. Canada's engagement with ASEAN Plus mechanisms, for instance, provides it with a better platform to demonstrate to Asia-Pacific states its commitment to regional values and norms. This is primarily due to ASEAN's centrality in regional developments and discourse that include China, the United States, and European Union member states. Canada's involvement in APEC and the CPTPP also clearly demonstrate Canadian values around free trade and open markets without carrying the baggage of an "America first" or perceived "anti-China" foreign policy.

#### CANADA AS AN ASIA-PACIFIC POWER

Canada will no doubt feel pressured to adopt the Indo-Pacific concept as several of its most important regional partners are encouraging endorsement. While Ottawa will be tempted to pursue this course of action, doing so would be a mistake that will ultimately weaken Canada's position in the Asia-Pacific, where its interests are growing year by year. In sum, there are five reasons that the country should avoid embracing the FOIP concept.

First, as demonstrated above, Canada's national interests do not support an Indo-Pacific over an Asia-Pacific geographic approach to the region. While

Canada is active through aid and security relations in the Middle East and Africa, it is not dependent on the Indian Ocean to achieve its strategic ends in either region.

Second, Canada has deep interests in the Asia-Pacific that it risks eroding if it expands its approach there to include MENA and sub-Saharan Africa.

Third, Canada would not benefit from participation in a FOIP construct characterized by a heavy security dimension, which both the U.S. and Australian visions contain.

Fourth, and closely related, Canada would be disadvantaged by entering into any perceived U.S.-led movement to balance China, both in terms of its bilateral relations with Beijing and in terms of its regional reputation. There is little to no support within ASEAN member states, for instance, for a future Asian order defined by great-power competition where states are forced to choose sides.

Fifth, and perhaps most importantly, Canada stands to gain little from realigning its vision of the Asia-Pacific with the visions of the FOIP proponent states. Materially, the FOIP vision does not have clear benefits for participant states; normatively, it outlines nothing new with respect to existing institutions, particularly those that are a part of ASEAN's regional architecture.

Where, then, does this leave Canada? Succinctly, it leaves Canada in no better or worse a situation than the one in which it currently finds itself in the Asia-Pacific. Ottawa, to be certain, would benefit from a more strategic approach to the region, but success does not at all depend on adherence to an Indo-Pacific vision or participation in a FOIP strategy.<sup>28</sup> There are inherent risks, too great to ignore, for Canada in adopting an Indo-Pacific model for engagement. The most immediate risk is the potential that FOIP proponents will soon abandon the concept as their governments change, alliances evolve, and visions readjust to the complexities in the Asia-Pacific. ♦

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<sup>28</sup> Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, "Canada as a 21st Century Pacific Power: Toward 'Broad Diversification' in Asia," January 2020 ~ [https://www.asiapacific.ca/sites/default/files/publication-pdf/canada\\_as\\_a\\_21st\\_century\\_pacific\\_power\\_web\\_version\\_1.pdf](https://www.asiapacific.ca/sites/default/files/publication-pdf/canada_as_a_21st_century_pacific_power_web_version_1.pdf).