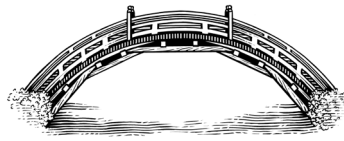


ROUNDTABLE

One Region, Multiple Strategies:
How Countries Are Approaching the Indo-Pacific



Jaeho Hwang

Jeffrey W. Hornung

Junya Nishino

Nick Bisley

Natalie Sambhi

Henryk Szadziewski and Anna Powles

Céline Pajon

John Nilsson-Wright

Alison Szalwinski

Introduction

Jaeho Hwang and Jeffrey W. Hornung

In May 2022, South Korea saw a new government, led by Yoon Suk-yeol, come to power. Part of the defining characteristics of the new government has been a more forward-looking approach in engagement with countries in the region, illustrated, in part, by the release of an Indo-Pacific strategy. This strategy's release sparked debate within South Korea and abroad, not only regarding its vision and implementation challenges but also regarding its content, feasibility, and alignment with reality.

Amid this active debate, the Institute for Global Strategy and Cooperation hosted an international conference on the Indo-Pacific in Seoul in March 2023. Entitled "The Path of Korean Diplomacy in the Era of the Indo-Pacific," the conference brought together over one hundred participants from twenty-two countries, including experts from sixteen countries, ambassadors and diplomatic representatives in Seoul from thirteen countries, the deputy speaker of the National Assembly of South Korea, and parliamentarians from four countries. The conference highlighted the fact that interest in the Indo-Pacific has transcended any one country and become an integral part of regional policy approaches.

Indeed, many countries today have their own Indo-Pacific strategies. However, these strategies are not in lockstep with one another. Indo-Pacific strategies mean different things to different states. And yet, for most, the defining characteristic of the growing interest in the Indo-Pacific region appears to be a looming showdown between China and the United States. The competition between the two nations is fierce, and many countries feel forced to choose sides despite the desire to maintain positive relations with both powers.

This roundtable seeks to build upon the proceedings in Seoul and invite additional regional voices to explore how countries in the Indo-Pacific perceive the growing U.S.-China competition, how these states plan to

JAEO HWANG is a Professor in the Division of International Studies at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies in Seoul and Director of the Institute of Global Strategy and Cooperation (South Korea). He specializes in Korean diplomacy, U.S.-China relations, South Korea–North Korea relations, and the diplomacy and security of the Indo-Pacific region. He can be reached at <jaeho@hufs.ac.kr>.

JEFFREY W. HORNUNG is a Senior Political Scientist at the RAND Corporation and an Adjunct Professor at Georgetown University (United States). He specializes in Japanese security and foreign policies, East Asian security issues, and U.S. foreign and defense policies in the Indo-Pacific region, including U.S. alliances. He can be reached at <jhornung@rand.org>.

position themselves between the two powers while they engage other regional countries, and how they intend to protect their respective interests in the face of prevailing regional trends. In other words, what are the Indo-Pacific strategies that regional states are pursuing? In this roundtable, nine prominent experts from eight countries explore the Indo-Pacific strategies of seven key countries—Australia, France, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, the United Kingdom, and the United States—and the Pacific Islands region.

The aim of the roundtable is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted political, economic, diplomatic, security, and military implications of the intersecting dynamics of cooperation and competition that are occurring in the Indo-Pacific. The contributors seek to do this by examining the insights that the Indo-Pacific strategies of different countries provide and exploring potential avenues for collaboration among nations. Specifically, each of the contributors details the regional engagement strategy of the country—or countries—they are writing about and the potential challenges to implementing that strategy. The authors also provide insights that shed new light on how regional countries are dealing with the unfolding U.S.-China competition. The essays conclude with constructive recommendations designed to help contribute to the future advancement of diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific region and meaningful directions for cooperation within the international community.

The roundtable opens with an essay by Jeffrey W. Hornung of the RAND Corporation that explains the United States' Indo-Pacific Strategy. Hornung argues that there is much continuity with his predecessors in President Joe Biden's regional approach, but the new strategy represents an acknowledgement that the United States cannot do everything by itself. While lauding the positives of the strategy, Hornung also highlights four areas where implementation of the strategy may prove difficult. These areas include addressing China as a challenge in U.S. regional engagement, fulfilling ASEAN centrality, maintaining real engagement with the Pacific Islands, and promoting economic engagement with regional countries without offering market access.

In the next essay, Keio University's Junya Nishino provides an assessment of Japan's "free and open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) vision. Nishino reminds readers that FOIP originated with the late prime minister Shinzo Abe. While maintaining the core tenants of Abe's vision, current prime minister Fumio Kishida has revamped FOIP. Despite improvements in several areas, Nishino argues that the new FOIP will face hurdles—but also

opportunities—in managing relations with China, promoting cooperation within the Quad, engaging with the global South, and rebooting cooperation with South Korea.

The roundtable then turns to Jaeho Hwang of Hankuk University of Foreign Studies to examine South Korea’s Indo-Pacific strategy. Hwang argues that the Yoon administration’s new strategy plays a critical role in advancing the government’s ambition to make South Korea a global pivotal state and a meaningful middle power so that the country can contribute a wider spectrum of roles in the international community beyond entirely focusing on North Korea. However, Hwang lists several challenges that can be expected in the months ahead as the Yoon administration seeks to implement this strategy. These challenges include managing U.S. expectations in terms of burden sharing, maintaining the bilateral relationship with China, sustaining adequate attention on North Korea, and aligning South Korea’s own strategy with other regional states’ strategies.

Australia’s Indo-Pacific strategy is examined by La Trobe University’s Nick Bisley. Bisley tracks the long history of the move toward “Indo-Pacific” as well as the growing pessimism and hardened rhetoric in Australia that have defined the country’s approach to the region, despite not having a formal Indo-Pacific strategy. He argues that despite the substance of Australia’s regional strategy remaining largely the same, its optimistic hedging approach has given way to one focused overtly on the hard balancing of Chinese power. Bisley notes several obstacles for Canberra, including a limited focus on East Asia and the South Pacific that may make a hard-balancing approach unsustainable over the long term and the consequences of focusing on China as the cause of regional instability for Australia’s relations with other Indo-Pacific countries.

Next, Natalie Sambhi of Verve Research examines Indonesia. In her essay, Sambhi argues that Indonesian leaders have formulated their own interpretation of the Indo-Pacific to maximize the country’s role in shaping the region within its means and values. Rather than a formal strategy, however, Indonesia’s Indo-Pacific vision focuses on promoting multipolarity and cooperation in the maritime domain. Importantly, Indonesia expressly avoids singling out any particular actor. Key among the challenges Indonesia’s leaders will face, however, is the question of whether Indonesia can continue to look to ASEAN as its preferred mechanism to execute these engagement efforts.

Henryk Szadziewski of the University of Hawai‘i and Anna Powles of Massey University provide insight into the often underexamined subject of the Pacific Islands. They note that among the growing number of countries focused on the Indo-Pacific region, some actors—China and the United States, in particular—have focused new attention on the Pacific Islands. They argue that while the United States has committed to re-engaging the region and reasserting U.S. strategic geography as part of the broader Pacific region, framing this engagement as strategic competition with China will undermine the United States’ ability to develop deep relationships with these islands.

Céline Pajon of the Institut français des relations internationales examines France in her essay. Pajon reminds readers that France is also a resident power and was the first European country to announce an Indo-Pacific strategy. While France seeks strategic autonomy, Pajon argues that this is increasingly challenged by geopolitical realities, such as the Australia–United Kingdom–United States defense pact, growing Chinese assertiveness, the ideological turn of U.S.–China competition, and even the war in Ukraine. Given France’s stated ambition to be active in the region but limited resources, Pajon argues that the country should recalibrate its posture away from being a balancing power and toward that of a pragmatic and constructive regional stakeholder.

The final essay of the roundtable is on the United Kingdom and is authored by John Nilsson-Wright of Cambridge University. Nilsson-Wright argues that the origins of the UK’s “tilt” toward the Indo-Pacific region were born out of the need to put a positive spin on the 2016 Brexit decision. Given several domestic criticisms surrounding the strategy, the government of Rishi Sunak has sought to revise this approach to focus on four key policy priorities. Nilsson-Wright notes that the strengths of the UK’s policy are its convergence with other global actors’ strategies, its building and reinforcement of existing relationships in a broader network, its continuity with past patterns of British engagement while seeking to raise Britain’s physical presence in the region, and the greater attention given to the region by UK bureaucratic institutions. He closes his essay by highlighting expected obstacles to the tilt, such as capacity constraints, trust issues, exaggerated economic expectations, and tensions between liberal values and national interests.

Collectively, the authors outline multiple strategies for engaging the Indo-Pacific region. All countries seek to have positive relations with the United States and China, but differences emerge in those approaches.

Some countries, like Japan and Australia, are taking more definitive sides in the geostrategic rivalry, supporting closely the United States' view of China as the region's biggest challenge. Many others, such as Indonesia, South Korea, and the Pacific Islands, look more toward balanced relations between the United States and China. Additionally, traditionally Atlantic countries like the UK and France are becoming more involved than ever in Indo-Pacific issues, promising to change the dynamics of regional responses. All countries face resource limitations, and how they continue to engage the Indo-Pacific and respond to regional issues will define the region in the years ahead. This roundtable seeks to provide insight into the trends behind those expected responses. ◆


The United States: A Comprehensive Strategy with Challenges Ahead

Jeffrey W. Hornung

The importance of the Indo-Pacific region to the United States stretches back to the founding of the American republic. For over two centuries, political, diplomatic, commercial, and people-to-people ties with Asian countries have helped the United States build the country. World War II demonstrated that conflict and instability in the Indo-Pacific region can have a direct impact on the United States. The war, as well as subsequent others, reinforced the United States' security interests in the region, which have since been strengthened through decades of treaty alliances with key regional actors.

In February 2022, the Biden administration released its Indo-Pacific Strategy, which advocates freedom and openness through regional connectivity, trade, investment, and deeper bilateral and multilateral partnerships. In this strategy, the Biden administration follows in the footsteps of its predecessors. The Obama administration, though, was the first to declare a U.S. pivot—later rebranded a “rebalance”—to Asia, which followed the Bush administration’s push for greater cooperation with Japan and India and closer engagement with China. In 2019, the Trump administration issued its “free and open Indo-Pacific” strategy.¹ It is with this last effort that President Joe Biden’s strategy shows the greatest continuity. Not only does Biden’s strategy maintain the focus on a free and open Indo-Pacific—a concept directly adopted from Japanese policy—but the core tenants of the strategy essentially remain the same as Donald Trump’s strategy. Despite their varied approaches to the Indo-Pacific, these Republican and Democrat administrations maintain a shared consistency in their understanding of the region’s relative importance, one that places an emphasis on allies and partners and—particularly since Obama—advocates the goal of keeping the region free from coercion and

JEFFREY W. HORNUNG is a Senior Political Scientist at the RAND Corporation and an Adjunct Professor at Georgetown University (United States). He specializes in Japanese security and foreign policies, East Asian security issues, and U.S. foreign and defense policies in the Indo-Pacific region, including U.S. alliances. He can be reached at <jhornung@rand.org>.

¹ U.S. Department of State, *A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision* (Washington, D.C., November 4, 2019)  <https://www.state.gov/a-free-and-open-indo-pacific-advancing-a-shared-vision>.

open to trade, investment, and ideas.² Collectively, this suggests that, despite centuries of engagement with the region, U.S. strategy toward the Indo-Pacific has been formalizing over the past twenty years, with the Biden administration's policy being the most recent iteration. This essay seeks to assess Biden's Indo-Pacific Strategy by examining what it is and where potential challenges in its implementation lie.

What Is the United States' Indo-Pacific Strategy?

Despite President Biden's critique of the Trump administration's approach to the Indo-Pacific, both Biden and Trump pursued strategies that were more similar than different. The strategy contains five key objectives that the United States intends to pursue with its allies, partners, and regional institutions. These objectives are (1) advance a free and open Indo-Pacific, (2) build connections within and beyond the region, (3) drive regional prosperity, (4) bolster Indo-Pacific security, and (5) build regional resilience to transnational threats. To achieve each of these objectives, the strategy identifies the following tasks:

- *Advance a free and open Indo-Pacific:*³
 - Invest in democratic institutions, a free press, and a vibrant civil society.
 - Improve fiscal transparency.
 - Ensure the region's seas and skies are governed and used according to international law.
 - Advance common approaches to critical and emerging technologies, the internet, and cyberspace.
- *Build connections within and beyond the region:*⁴
 - Deepen regional treaty alliances.
 - Strengthen relationships with regional partners (with specific mention of India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mongolia, New Zealand, the Pacific Islands, Singapore, Taiwan, and Vietnam).

² Charles Edel, "What to Expect from the Biden Administration's Indo-Pacific Strategy," United States Studies Centre, University of Sydney, February 10, 2022 ~ <https://www.usssc.edu.au/analysis/what-to-expect-from-the-biden-administrations-indo-pacific-strategy>.

³ White House, *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States* (Washington, D.C., February 2022), 8 ~ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 9–10.

- Strengthen the Quad (i.e., the security dialogue grouping of Australia, India, Japan, and the United States).
- Deepen cooperation with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) (with specific mention of ASEAN centrality).
- Partner with the Pacific Islands and prioritize negotiations with the Compacts of Free Association (COFAs).⁵
- Expand U.S. diplomatic presence (with specific mention of Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands).
- Forge connections between the Indo-Pacific and the Euro-Atlantic.
- *Drive regional prosperity:*⁶
 - Propose an Indo-Pacific economic framework (with mention of new approaches to trade, governance of digital economies and data flows, and supply chains).
 - Promote free, fair, and open trade and investment through the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) grouping.
 - Close the region's infrastructure gap through the Build Back Better World partnership with G-7 members.
- *Bolster Indo-Pacific security:*⁷
 - Extend integrated deterrence (via cooperation and interoperability with allies and partners).
 - Innovate to operate in rapidly evolving threat environments (i.e., space, cyberspace, and areas of critical and emerging technologies).
 - Foster security ties between U.S. allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond.
 - Expand U.S. Coast Guard presence and cooperation.
 - Cooperate to address and prevent terrorism and violent extremism.
 - Strengthen collective regional capabilities to prepare for and respond to transnational threats (with specific mention of environmental and natural disasters, biological threats, and trafficking of all types).

⁵ The COFAs are agreements governing the relationships between the United States and the three Pacific Island states: the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, and the Republic of Palau. They allow the United States to manage the external security affairs of these states and maintain military facilities there, while these Pacific Island states receive U.S. economic assistance and the right for their citizens to live and work in the United States.

⁶ White House, *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*, 11–12.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 12–13.

- *Build regional resilience to 21st-century transnational threats:*⁸
 - Work with allies and partners to limit the global temperature increase to 1.5 degrees Celsius.
 - Reduce regional vulnerability to the impacts of climate change and environmental degradation.
 - End the Covid-19 pandemic and bolster global health security.

Five major points stand out from this list. First, although this administration has pushed to differentiate itself from its predecessor, Biden's Indo-Pacific Strategy shares fundamental similarities with those of previous U.S. administrations in identifying the region as a core interest and characterizing China as one of the major challenges to continued peace and stability. Second, despite the focus on strategic competition, not everything in the strategy involves hard security competition. In fact, there are many nonsecurity areas of cooperation included, such as mitigating climate change, improving public health, developing clean energy, addressing resource scarcity, and managing governance challenges. Third, the United States does not envision itself as capable of implementing this strategy alone. In addition to cooperation with regional organizations, the strategy emphasizes the importance of working with key allies and partners, either bilaterally or via multilateral vehicles. Toward that end, the strategy states the need to “modernize our long-standing alliances, strengthen emerging partnerships, and invest in regional organizations.”⁹ Fourth, while the strategy includes a heavy focus on traditional allies, there is a clear emphasis on wanting to work more with ASEAN and Pacific Island countries. For ASEAN, the strategy is intended to help strengthen and empower the countries of Southeast Asia. For the Pacific Island countries, it is to help them “build their capacity and resilience as secure, independent actors,” and relatedly, it prioritizes finalizing the COFAs.¹⁰ Finally, although the strategy barely mentions China, it is clear that China is one of its major considerations. In discussing a key driver of the intensifying U.S. regional focus, it cites China's “coercion and aggression” as “most acute in the Indo-Pacific.”¹¹ This focus is much more prominent in other strategic documents,

⁸ White House, *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*, 14.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

such as the Biden administration's National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy.

Challenges to Implementation

In the year since the Indo-Pacific Strategy was released, the Biden administration has made important inroads toward implementing its vision. For example, Washington has been vocal in its support of Taiwan, has prioritized the Quad as a vehicle for regional engagement, and has devoted funds to the region. Furthermore, critical alliances have been strengthened: with Australia via the Australia–United Kingdom–United States (AUKUS) agreement, with Japan via the sale of Tomahawk missiles, and with the Philippines through the addition of four new bases to the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement. Still, as U.S. defense expert Zack Cooper has argued, it is impossible to judge the strategy in isolation from a decade of unfulfilled American promises about prioritizing the region.¹² Given this, it is important to take note on four areas where implementation of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy may prove challenging in the months ahead.

Highlighting China as the challenge. The first area of difficulty stems from having China as a key motivation behind U.S. engagement. Most countries in the Indo-Pacific do not want to choose sides between the United States and China, and there is general anxiety that the current situation between the United States and China may spiral into confrontation, which, in turn, could pose challenges to regional growth.¹³ In fact, most countries see their national interests as being best served by engaging positively and proactively with both Washington and Beijing.¹⁴ Polls show that in many countries, people hold positive views of the United States but at the same time see China's influence to be growing. For example, among the nineteen countries surveyed in a recent Pew Research Center poll, South Korea, Japan, and Singapore held more positive views of the United States than China (89% vs. 19%, 70% vs. 12%, and 67% vs. 51%, respectively), but they also predominately viewed China's influence as growing more (55% vs.

¹² Zack Cooper, "Words Versus Deeds in Biden's Indo-Pacific Strategy," War on the Rocks, February 21, 2022 ~ <https://warontherocks.com/2022/02/words-versus-deeds-in-bidens-indo-pacific-strategy>.

¹³ Huong Le Thu, "Biden's Indo-Pacific Strategy: Traps to Avoid in Southeast Asia," *Global Asia* 16, no. 4 (2021) ~ https://www.globalasia.org/v16no4/cover/bidens-indo-pacific-strategy-traps-to-avoid-in-southeast-asia_huong-le-thu.

¹⁴ Stephen Olson, "Three Problems with the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy," Hinrich Foundation, February 15, 2022 ~ <https://www.hinrichfoundation.com/research/article/us-china/three-problems-united-states-indo-pacific-strategy>.

33%, 69% vs. 25%, and 66% vs. 24%, respectively).¹⁵ Among the countries surveyed, only Malaysia held more favorable views of China, and only Poland saw U.S. influence as increasing more than that of China. Majorities in the countries surveyed also identified China as their country's largest and most important economic partner. Collectively, this suggests that regional countries may support broad U.S. initiatives that sustain the status quo but do not back efforts to force countries into choosing a side.

The Biden administration has said that Washington is not asking countries to choose between the two powers; rather, it wants to ensure countries have a choice.¹⁶ If that is true, is the United States ready if Indo-Pacific countries choose China? Importantly, if U.S. strategy depends on gathering a group of like-minded countries to help push back on China, Washington may confront difficulties in obtaining buy-in from some regional actors, leaving parts of its strategy unimplementable or implemented by a small group of partners but not embraced by the wider region.

Fulfilling ASEAN centrality. Second, the United States has repeatedly called for ASEAN centrality in its foreign policy statements—the principle that ASEAN should be positioned as the center and driving force of Southeast Asian regional architectures. The Indo-Pacific Strategy is no different, stating that the United States “endorse[s] ASEAN centrality and support[s] ASEAN in its efforts to deliver sustainable solutions to the region’s most pressing challenges.”¹⁷ As proof of this respect for ASEAN centrality, senior officials visit Southeast Asian countries and participate in ASEAN meetings; and President Biden has attended the U.S.-ASEAN summit. While U.S. attendance at these meetings is a meaningful marker for ASEAN members, it is not the only way the Biden administration has sought to demonstrate ASEAN centrality. Washington has also shown a willingness to engage ASEAN as an institutional collective, respect it as an agenda setter by publicly supporting the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, and recognize it as a convener and facilitator in regional affairs.¹⁸

¹⁵ Laura Silver, Christine Huang, and Laura Clancy, “Across 19 Countries, More People See the U.S. Than China Favorably—but More See China’s Influence Growing,” Pew Research Center, June 29, 2022. ~ <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/06/29/across-19-countries-more-people-see-the-u-s-than-china-favorably-but-more-see-chinas-influence-growing>.

¹⁶ Antony J. Blinken, “The Administration’s Approach to the People’s Republic of China,” U.S. State Department, May 26, 2022. ~ <https://www.state.gov/the-administrations-approach-to-the-peoples-republic-of-china>.

¹⁷ White House, *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*, 9.

¹⁸ Xirui Li, “Is the Biden Administration Serious about ‘ASEAN Centrality’?” *Diplomat*, May 14, 2022. ~ <https://thediplomat.com/2022/05/is-the-biden-administration-serious-about-asean-centrality>.

Questions abound, however, beyond these efforts. For example, the United States took five years to appoint an ambassador to ASEAN (a lag that spanned both the Trump and Biden administrations). Furthermore, it is unclear if U.S. development aid to the region comes anywhere close to the investments China is making in regional countries via its Belt and Road Initiative and Global Development Initiative. Importantly, the Biden administration's investments in the Quad and flexible trilateral groupings that result in visible summits and quick deliverables invite questions about which vehicles are central to U.S. regional engagement. Southeast Asian countries are suspicious of minilaterals like the Quad, which they see as a challenge to ASEAN centrality.¹⁹

The United States' focus on democracy might also cause problems in trying to elevate the U.S. relationship with ASEAN. When the Biden administration sought to implement its vision to strengthen democratic governance globally with its Summit for Democracy, for example, it caused discord. Only Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines were invited from Southeast Asia, while U.S. ally Thailand and key security partner Singapore were left out. While the Indo-Pacific Strategy does not focus on democracy, the National Security Strategy does, demonstrating the incongruous priorities of the Biden administration. Because most countries in ASEAN are indifferent to arguments about the superiority of "democratic" values and the framing of "democracies versus autocracies," the United States is likely to struggle in getting buy-in from ASEAN members where Indo-Pacific initiatives overlap with its democracy promotion efforts.²⁰ Collectively, it is unclear how receptive ASEAN states will be to U.S. calls to help support U.S. strategies or efforts that appear to push back against China.

Maintaining real engagement with the Pacific Islands. A third challenge is what the United States plans to do for the Pacific Islands. The prioritization of the Pacific Islands in the Indo-Pacific Strategy is significant, and the United States has followed through in some key areas. For example, in September 2022, Washington hosted the first United States–Pacific Island Country Summit, where leaders issued the Declaration on U.S.–Pacific Partnership, a commitment to expand and deepen cooperation between

¹⁹ Jonathan Stromseth, "Taking Stock of US-ASEAN Relations as Biden Convenes a Special Summit," Brookings Institution, May 11, 2022 ~ <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/05/11/taking-stock-of-u-s-asean-relations-as-biden-convenes-a-special-summit>.

²⁰ Thu, "Biden's Indo-Pacific Strategy."

the United States and the Pacific Islands in the years ahead.²¹ Toward that end, the Biden administration not only announced \$810 million in expanded support to the islands but agreed to a broad array of efforts that include, among others, developing the first-ever U.S. national strategy for the Pacific Islands; recognizing Cook Islands and Niue as sovereign states; building capacity by sending the first-ever U.S. envoy to the Pacific Islands Forum and establishing embassies in Solomon Islands, Tonga, and Kiribati; elevating USAID's presence in the region; and, both unilaterally as well as via coordination with allies and partners, increasing support to the Pacific in nontraditional security areas such as public health, climate change, clean energy, and sustainable infrastructure.²² One of the biggest efforts has been the Partners in the Blue Pacific Initiative, a grouping of like-minded countries coordinating their engagement efforts to enhance Pacific regionalism. Taken together, these efforts represent "monumental steps in improving [U.S.] engagement" with the region.²³ Yet, it will likely take a long time to overcome years of neglect by previous U.S. administrations and the ill will that resulted.²⁴

The challenge for the Biden administration will be to listen to the needs of the region instead of framing engagement in geopolitical terms. This process may mean reassessing policies toward these islands to offer enduring partnerships and long-term commitments. Part of this effort will be continuing to show up to regional engagements. Biden's skipping of the U.S.–Pacific Islands Forum meeting in Papua New Guinea in May 2023 is an example of exactly this kind of missed opportunity to reinvigorate U.S. leadership in the region. An even bigger issue will be seeing through the completion of negotiations on renewing the COFAs with the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, and the Republic of Palau. Despite the stated importance of these relationships, negotiations have taken a long time, and promised appropriations are not quickly being fulfilled. If the United States struggles to complete the negotiations on these special relationships in a timely manner, how can it expect to succeed

²¹ "Declaration on U.S.-Pacific Partnership," White House, September 29, 2022 ~ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/09/29/declaration-on-u-s-pacific-partnership>.

²² "Fact Sheet: Roadmap for a 21st-Century U.S.-Pacific Island Partnership," White House, September 29, 2022 ~ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/09/29/fact-sheet-roadmap-for-a-21st-century-u-s-pacific-island-partnership>.

²³ Alan C. Tidwell, "Next Steps for American Engagement with the Pacific Islands," Lowy Institute, Interpreter, August 20, 2022 ~ <https://www.loyyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/next-steps-american-engagement-pacific-islands>.

²⁴ Eileen Natuzzi, "U.S. Touch and Go Diplomacy with Solomon Islands," Griffith Asia Institute, August 15, 2022 ~ <https://blogs.griffith.edu.au/asiainsights/us-touch-and-go-diplomacy-with-solomon-islands>.

with the broader Oceania region? Collectively, not showing up to regional gatherings and failing to fulfill obligations and prioritize negotiations sends the message to the region that “U.S. policy has taken the region’s political support and security cooperation for granted.”²⁵

Promising economic engagement without market access. Perhaps the biggest challenge in implementing Biden’s Indo-Pacific Strategy comes with what is not listed in the strategy document: a commitment to establishing or participating in a free trade agreement. It is no secret that what many countries in the region want is greater access to the U.S. economy and much greater trade liberalization. The United States earlier supported the development of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, but after Trump pulled out of that framework, neither the Trump nor Biden administration has shown interest in joining its successor, the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). China, by contrast, has found success in signing numerous trade deals, including the world’s largest trade bloc, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership. Instead of joining either of these agreements, the United States is intent on promoting its Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity. This is not an agreement to liberalize trade or investment; rather, it is an agreement focused on setting rules and norms to tackle four key issues: supply-chain resilience; clean energy, decarbonization, and infrastructure; taxation and anticorruption; and fair and resilient trade.²⁶ Regional countries, however, have not shown an overwhelmingly positive response to the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity. Instead, their response has been marked by confusion over its objectives, doubts about its durability, and views that it is an inferior alternative to the United States joining a regional free trade agreement like the CPTPP.²⁷ As such, given regional states’ interests in greater access to the U.S. market, it is difficult to see how these states will make concessions on climate or labor standards—which the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity proposes—if the United States is not delivering what they really want. This suggests that the

²⁵ Alec Dionne and Maggie Sparling, “A New U.S. Approach to the Pacific Island Countries,” New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy, October 13, 2022 \approx <https://newlinesinstitute.org/u-s-foreign-policy/a-new-u-s-approach-to-the-pacific-island-countries>.

²⁶ “Asia, President Biden and a Dozen Indo-Pacific Partners Launch the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity,” White House, Fact Sheet, May 23, 2022 \approx <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/05/23/fact-sheet-in-asia-president-biden-and-a-dozen-indo-pacific-partners-launch-the-indo-pacific-economic-framework-for-prosperity>.

²⁷ Matthew Goodman and Aidan Arasasinham, “Regional Perspectives on the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 11, 2022 \approx <https://www.csis.org/analysis/regional-perspectives-indo-pacific-economic-framework>.

United States will likely find it difficult to obtain support for the economic aspects of its Indo-Pacific Strategy.

Conclusion

Despite the Biden administration's concerted focus on the Indo-Pacific region, there are several challenges that still have not been overcome more than a year after the release of the Indo-Pacific Strategy. With geopolitical competition between the United States and China continuing, and the United States relying on partnering with like-minded countries as part of its efforts in this competition, Washington will need to address these challenges if it continues to implement its stated regional strategy. ◆

Japan's New Plan for a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" and Its Challenges

Junya Nishino

Japan's vision for a "free and open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) originated from Tokyo's desire to promote a rules-based order, economic prosperity, and peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region. In articulating and promoting Japan's vision for the FOIP, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe played a significant role.

In August 2007, Abe delivered a speech at the Indian Parliament in which he emphasized the importance of enhancing maritime security and cooperation between the Indian and Pacific Oceans through strategic cooperation among like-minded countries.¹ This speech, titled "Confluence of the Two Seas," is often seen as a precursor to Japan's vision for the Indo-Pacific, highlighting the commitment to promoting regional stability, economic prosperity, and universal values such as freedom, democracy, and human rights in the broader two-ocean region. Another significant milestone in the development of Japan's FOIP vision was a speech Abe gave in Kenya in August 2016. During the Sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development, Abe stressed that Japan "bore the responsibility of fostering the confluence of the Pacific and Indian Oceans and of Asia and Africa into a place that values freedom, the rule of law, and the market economy, free from force or coercion, and making it prosperous."²

These speeches by Abe laid the groundwork for Japan's FOIP vision by articulating the key principles and objectives that would guide Japan's approach to the Indo-Pacific. Japan presented three pillars to realize a free and open Indo-Pacific:

1. Promote and establish the rule of law, freedom of navigation, and free trade, among others.

JUNYA NISHINO is a Professor in the Faculty of Law, Department of Political Science, at Keio University (Japan), where he also serves as Director of the Center for Contemporary Korean Studies. His research focuses on contemporary Korean politics, international relations in East Asia, and Japan-Korea relations. He can be reached at <nishino@keio.jp>.

¹ Shinzo Abe, "Confluence of the Two Seas' Speech by H.E. Mr. Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan at the Parliament of the Republic of India," Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Japan), August 22, 2007 ~ <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/speech-2.html>.

² Shinzo Abe, "Address by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe at the Opening Session of the Sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development," Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Japan), August 27, 2016 ~ https://www.mofa.go.jp/af/af2/page4e_000496.html.

2. Pursue economic prosperity (by improving connectivity and strengthening economic partnerships, including economic partnership agreements, free trade agreements, and investment treaties).
3. Commit to peace and stability (including activities on capacity building on maritime law enforcement, humanitarian assistance and disaster-relief cooperation, and similar efforts).³

Though Abe's speeches were influential in initiating and shaping the discourse around Japan's FOIP vision, the concept itself has continued to evolve, and subsequent Japanese administrations have further developed and endorsed the plan. This essay examines the most recent iteration of Japan's FOIP plan under current prime minister Fumio Kishida (who took office in October 2021), its areas of focus, and the challenges and opportunities it faces in implementation.

Japan's New Plan for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific

On a visit to India on March 20, 2023, Prime Minister Kishida launched a revamped FOIP plan. Noting that India was also where Abe had originally linked the Indian and Pacific regions, he discussed the need to develop the FOIP concept and expand Japanese cooperation to achieve the goal of a free and open region.⁴

In this speech, Kishida emphasized that the international community was at a turning point and highlighted the importance of understanding the historical and cultural backgrounds of countries in the global South. He explained that the lack of a guiding perspective for the international order, as demonstrated by the differing attitudes toward Russia's aggression against Ukraine, is a significant challenge and argued that FOIP is gaining relevance as a visionary concept that promotes cooperation over division and confrontation in the changing paradigm of international relations.

At the same time, Kishida reiterated that in Japan's new plan, the fundamental concept of FOIP remains the same: valuing and defending freedom, supporting and abiding by the rule of law, enhancing connectivity, and promoting prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region. These include upholding the principles of the UN Charter, such as respect for sovereignty

³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Japan), "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" ~ <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000430632.pdf>.

⁴ Fumio Kishida, "The Future of the Indo-Pacific—Japan's New Plan for a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific'— 'Together with India, as an Indispensable Partner,'" Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Japan), March 20, 2023 ~ https://www.mofa.go.jp/fp/pc/page1e_000586.html.

and territorial integrity, and he also stressed the principles of diversity, inclusiveness, and openness, rejecting exclusion and the imposition of values. He suggested that the approach to creating a free and open Indo-Pacific going forward should be based on “rulemaking through dialogue” and “equal partnership” among nations, aiming for a world in which diverse nations coexist and prosper under the rule of law without falling into geopolitical competition.

With this speech, Kishida introduced the four pillars of cooperation for Japan’s new FOIP vision that are suited for the current turning point in history.⁵ These pillars are:

1. *Principles for peace and rules for prosperity.* The first pillar emphasizes the importance of upholding principles for peace and rules for prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region. Kishida highlighted the erosion of the rule of law and emphasized the need to collectively reaffirm and promote basic, common principles that the international community should uphold—respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity and opposition to unilateral changes to the status quo by force. In the speech, he strongly condemned Russia’s aggression against Ukraine as an example of violating these principles.
2. *Addressing challenges in an Indo-Pacific way.* The second pillar focuses on addressing global challenges in an Indo-Pacific way, intending problem-solving to be collaborative, cooperative, and suited to the collective needs of the region. Kishida acknowledged the increasing importance of addressing challenges to the global commons such as climate change, health, food supply, and cyberspace. Japan aims to enhance cooperation in these areas to augment societies’ resilience and sustainability and achieve an “equal partnership” among nations.
3. *Multilayered connectivity.* The third pillar focuses on cooperating on multilayered connectivity. This pillar recognizes that connectivity is essential for economic growth but emphasizes the need for diversification to avoid political vulnerabilities. Three regions are mentioned as Japan’s focus: Southeast Asia, South Asia (including India), and the Pacific Islands. For example, in Southeast Asia, Japan supports the Association of Southeast Asian Nations’ “ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific” and will contribute to the Japan-ASEAN Integration Fund. In South Asia, Japan aims to promote the Bay of Bengal–Northeast India industrial value chain concept with India and Bangladesh. Among the Pacific Islands, Japan is supporting infrastructure projects and an undersea telecommunications cable project (with Australia and the United States), aiming to overcome vulnerabilities and enhance connectivity.

⁵ Kishida, “The Future of the Indo-Pacific—Japan’s New Plan for a ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific.’”

4. *Extending efforts for security and safe use of the sea to the air.*²⁷The fourth pillar emphasizes the significance of oceans and the need to nurture their shared resources. It also expands the scope of FOIP to include not only the sea but the air and issues related to ensuring the safe and stable use of airspace. With this pillar, Japan calls for adherence to the three principles of the rule of law at sea: making and clarifying claims based on international law, avoiding the use of force or coercion, and seeking peaceful dispute resolution. Japan supports the strengthening of law enforcement capabilities and capacity building (both human and technical) in air and maritime security endeavors.

Challenges and Opportunities for Implementation

Managing the relationship with China. One of Japan's central challenges in implementing its new FOIP plan lies in managing its relationship with China amid the intensifying U.S.-China strategic competition.

Many see Japan's Indo-Pacific vision as a response to its own and other states' concerns about China's growing regional influence, assertive actions in the East and South China Seas, and Belt and Road Initiative. As Japan seeks to promote a rules-based order, it inevitably will face competition with China's alternative vision for the region, which is centered around Beijing's own interests and norms.

At the same time, however, Japan recognizes it must cooperate with China on various regional and global issues, including economics, addressing climate change, and managing nontraditional security challenges. It is essential for Japan to effectively communicate its intentions, principles, and the inclusive nature of Tokyo's FOIP vision to address Chinese concerns and maintain constructive engagement. Thus, Japan must strike a delicate balance between engaging China and upholding its FOIP principles, which emphasize a rules-based order, freedom of navigation, and respect for international law.


Japan and China also share significant economic interdependence, as China is Japan's largest trading partner and Japanese businesses have significant investments in China. Ensuring economic stability and successfully managing trade relations with China pose challenges in implementing Japan's new FOIP plan. While Japan seeks to diversify its trade partners and enhance supply chain resilience, it must at the same time balance these efforts with maintaining economic cooperation and stability with China.

Japan's FOIP strategy aims to strengthen regional security cooperation, uphold international law, and enhance maritime security in the Indo-Pacific, which includes addressing issues such as territorial disputes and freedom of navigation. However, as the U.S.-China competition intensifies, security concerns are also arising regarding potential military conflicts or incidents in areas such as the East and South China Seas, with unclear implications for Japan. China's assertive behavior in the region poses challenges for Japan's FOIP vision.

As a result, Japan decided to make greater efforts to enhance its security capabilities, such as expanding its defense budget, deepening security partnerships with other countries, and revising its national security strategy in late 2022.⁶ But it is possible that China may perceive these new efforts as a threat, exacerbating the security dilemma between the two countries. To avoid potential further mistrust and tensions, Japan needs to foster security dialogues, promote confidence-building measures, and work toward a cooperative security framework in the region that includes China.

Promoting cooperation within the Quad. The Quad, comprising Australia, India, Japan, and the United States, holds an important role in realizing Japan's FOIP vision. The Quad serves as a platform for strategic discussions, security cooperation, and promoting a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific region. While all four members share a general vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific, their specific policies and approaches differ due to their unique geopolitical, economic, and strategic considerations. One of the key motivations behind the formation of the Quad was the shared concern over China's behavior and influence in the Indo-Pacific region. However, balancing the need to address these concerns with the imperative of maintaining a constructive and stable relationship with China presents a difficult situation for Japan and other Quad members, especially as the U.S.-China competition accelerates.

India's approach and actions within the Quad, in particular, have implications for the overall effectiveness and cohesion of the grouping. India, as a rising power, is keen on preserving its strategic autonomy and avoiding alignment with any specific bloc. While India shares concerns with the other Quad members regarding China's assertiveness in the region, it is wary of being perceived as joining a containment strategy against Beijing.

⁶ Cabinet Secretariat of Japan, *National Security Strategy of Japan* (Tokyo, December 2022)  <https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryuu/221216anzenhoshou/nss-e.pdf>.

This cautious approach stems from India's historical policy of nonalignment and its desire to maintain constructive engagement with all major powers. In addition, India's border disputes with China have highlighted New Delhi's security concerns and desire to balance its relations with both the United States and China.

The Quad has been promoting practical cooperation in various areas described in Japan's FOIP vision, including infrastructure, maritime security, counterterrorism, cybersecurity, and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.⁷ However, ensuring inclusivity in the region remains difficult. Other countries in the Indo-Pacific, particularly those that have concerns about the Quad's potential to become an exclusive bloc, may be cautious about engaging with the group and its initiatives. Japan will need to address these concerns and actively work toward building broader regional cooperation to avoid alienation and promote inclusiveness.

Engaging with the global South. The global South comprises countries at different stages of development, ranging from emerging economies to the world's least developed countries. To promote the stability, connectivity, and economic development in the global South called for in the new FOIP plan, Japan will need to overcome the challenges inherent in these states' varying levels of economic development and resources, infrastructure, diverse political systems, and often different regional priorities to support inclusive growth and development that take into account these states' diverse needs and capacities.

Many global South countries face significant financing and resource constraints, limiting their ability to participate fully in initiatives under Japan's FOIP vision. Japan, as a key supporter of infrastructure development in the region, will need to address these challenges by providing accessible financing options, capacity building, and technical assistance. Ensuring that the benefits of FOIP reach these states requires innovative approaches to overcome resource limitations. As a result of these resource and capacity discrepancies, these countries also often have unique regional priorities and concerns that may differ from those of developed economies—these can include poverty reduction, food security, and climate change adaptation over more traditional geopolitical or security considerations. To ensure their active participation and engagement, Japan needs to align its plan for FOIP with the specific needs and interests of the countries involved.

⁷ "Quad Leaders Meeting Tokyo 2022," May 24, 2022. <https://www.kantei.go.jp/quad-leaders-meeting-tokyo2022/index.html>.

Additionally, the global South is often a target of engagement and influence by other regional powers, especially China, Russia, and the United States. Japan's new plan for FOIP may face competition from less-aligned countries in terms of resource allocation, project implementation, and political influence. Countries in the Indo-Pacific region often prioritize economic development and security concerns over democratic ideals. Japan's principled approach may clash with the interests of countries that have different governance systems or prioritize stability or economic growth over democratic reforms. Overcoming obstacles here requires Japan to differentiate itself by emphasizing the principles of transparency, inclusivity, and sustainability in its engagement with the global South.

Given these objectives and the challenges, Japan plans to revise its development cooperation charter and set forth new guidelines for ODA for the next ten years. Japan will respond robustly to the needs of each country, with its public and private sectors working in tandem. The new FOIP plan will mobilize more than \$75 billion in public and private funds by 2030 for infrastructure in the Indo-Pacific region to meet demands from recipient countries.⁸

Rebooting cooperation with South Korea. Improving Japan–South Korea relations after a ten-year deterioration of bilateral ties provided an opportunity not only for Japan but also for South Korea to reaffirm the potential for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region and the wider international community.

In the wake of the October 1998 Joint Declaration signed by then Japanese prime minister Keizo Obuchi and South Korean president Kim Dae-jung, the two states formed a partnership to promote regional cooperation.⁹ Likewise, in a joint press release statement following the April 2008 summit between Yasuo Fukuda and Lee Myung-bak, the two leaders pledged to “join with one another in contributing to the international community.”¹⁰ This is a collaboration with much to offer the world in terms of public goods, but that promise has been put on hold during the long freeze in bilateral relations. The movement toward rapprochement under the

⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Japan), “New Plan for a ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP);” March 2023 \approx <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100477660.pdf>.

⁹ “Japan–Republic of Korea Joint Declaration: A New Japan–Republic of Korea Partnership towards the Twenty-first Century,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Japan), October 7, 1998 \approx <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/korea/joint9810.html>.

¹⁰ “Nikkan Kyodo puresu happyo” [Japan–Republic of Korea Joint Press Communique], Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Japan), April 21, 2008 \approx https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/area/korea/visit/0804_2_pr.html.

Kishida cabinet and the Yoon Sul-yeol administration offers an opportunity to rekindle this potential.

The Yoon administration has embraced the diplomatic goal of turning South Korea into a “global pivotal state” through proactive contributions to the international community. In December 2022, Seoul released its Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region, echoing Japan’s FOIP initiative.¹¹ At their March 2023 summit in Tokyo, President Yoon called for close partnership and cooperation with the international community in the pursuit of both policies.¹²

On March 17, Yoon delivered a speech at Keio University in Tokyo. Addressing students from Japan and South Korea, he stated,

Korea and Japan, two close neighbors, are liberal democracies that share a foundation built on universal values such as freedom, human rights, and the rule of law. This fact in itself holds a special meaning. This signifies that our two countries must assume our leadership roles together as we strive towards the common goal of peace and prosperity in the international community through solidarity and cooperation, transcending mere adherence to international norms and mutual respect.¹³

Japan has also been on a similar course in charting a new path for its foreign and security policies. Its National Security Strategy and two other key defense documents were revised at the end of last year, and in March 2023—shortly after the summit with Yoon—Kishida traveled to New Delhi, where he announced the new FOIP plan. This confluence of events has presented a rare opening for Japan and South Korea to coordinate and cooperate on matters of regional strategy and policy. Their ability to capitalize on that opportunity could have important consequences for the future of these two countries and the entire Indo-Pacific region.


Conclusion

Japan’s FOIP vision has evolved over time since its first iteration as a “confluence of the two seas,” with significant contributions from Prime Ministers Abe and, more recently, Kishida. Implementing Japan’s new

¹¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs (ROK), *Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region* (Seoul, December 2022) ~ https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5676/view.do?seq=322133.

¹² Yoon Suk-yeol, “Opening Remarks by President Yoon Suk-yeol at Korea-Japan Summit,” Office of the President (ROK), March 17, 2023 ~ <https://eng.president.go.kr/speeches/F97FXrp3?page=3>.

¹³ Yoon Suk-yeol, “Remarks by President Yoon Suk-yeol in Lecture for Korea and Japan’s Future Generations,” Office of the President (ROK), March 17, 2023 ~ <https://eng.president.go.kr/speeches/C3nefmN?page=1>.

FOIP plan faces challenges in managing the Japan-China relationship, promoting cooperation both within the Quad and between the Quad and other states, engaging with the global South, and restarting cooperation with South Korea. Given the new FOIP plan's recent release in March 2023, it remains to be seen whether and how Japan will overcome these hurdles. To realize its regional vision, Japan must continuously work to gain widespread support and endorsement for the key principles of a free and open Indo-Pacific—defense of freedom and the rule of law and respect for diversity, inclusiveness, and openness—not only from advanced countries but also from emerging and developing countries. 

South Korea's Indo-Pacific Strategy: More than Strategic Clarity and toward Becoming a Global Player

Jaeho Hwang

Is the region we live in called the “Asia-Pacific” or the “Indo-Pacific”?¹ Many countries around the world are currently formulating their positions toward the United States’ Indo-Pacific Strategy, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, actively or passively, and regardless of whether they support it. In the case of South Korea, at a summit with U.S. president Joe Biden in May 2022, President Yoon Suk-yeol agreed to strengthen cooperation with the United States with the goal of promoting a free and open Indo-Pacific region.² This move by the newly inaugurated Yoon signified that South Korea, which until that point had been debating whether to use the term “Asia-Pacific” or “Indo-Pacific,” had determined decisively to go all in on the latter. Then, on December 28, the administration officially unveiled its Strategy for a Free, Peaceful and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region, in which it pledged to transform South Korea into a “global pivotal state” that contributes to the freedom, peace, and prosperity of the international community.³ South Korean foreign minister Park Jin not only described the strategy as a “turning point in the history of South Korea’s foreign policy” but also announced that it would serve as the “foreign policy doctrine of the Yoon Suk-yeol government.”⁴

This essay argues that the Yoon administration’s Indo-Pacific strategy plays a crucial role in realizing the president’s vision of South Korea as a

JAEOHO HWANG is a Professor in the Division of International Studies at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies in Seoul and Director of the Institute of Global Strategy and Cooperation (South Korea). He specializes in Korean diplomacy, U.S.-China relations, South Korea–North Korea relations, and the diplomacy and security of the Indo-Pacific region. He can be reached at <jaeho@hufs.ac.kr>.

¹ Jaeho Hwang, “Women shenghuo zai ‘Yintai’ haishi ‘Yatai?’” [Are We Living in the “Indo-Pacific” or the “Asia-Pacific?”], *Huanqiu Shibao*, October 23, 2019 ~ <https://opinion.huanqiu.com/article/9CaKrnKnnKI>.

² “[Jeonmun] HanMi jungsang gongdong sungmyung” [[Full Text] Republic of Korea-United States Leaders’ Joint Statement, Office of the President of the Republic of Korea], President’s Office (Republic of Korea), Briefing, May 21, 2022 ~ <https://www.korea.kr/news/policyNewsView.do?newsId=148901846>.

³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Republic of Korea), *Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region* (Seoul, December 2022), 7 ~ https://www.mofa.go.kr/www/brd/m_4080/view.do?seq=373216.

⁴ Park Jin, “The Indo-Pacific Strategy of Freedom, Peace and Prosperity,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Republic of Korea), December 28, 2022 ~ https://www.mofa.go.kr/minister/brd/m_20033/view.do?seq=302647.

global pivotal state that embodies the international order and universal values. South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy reflects the country's strong will to be part of the global alliance with the United States as well as to be a meaningful middle power that aims to meet the expectations of the international community beyond attempting to manage North Korea. However, South Korea must also consider the costs in terms of its relationship with China when adopting a position of strategic clarity that aligns with the United States and be prepared for China's reaction. The future of Indo-Pacific strategies of other countries may also influence how South Korea carries out its own strategy for the region—after all, South Korea's foreign policy has entered a new phase. In this regard, South Korea's plan for the Indo-Pacific region should serve as a catalyst for Seoul to develop its own unique, Korean foreign policy approach.

Background on South Korea's Indo-Pacific Strategy

The South Korean government has always responded, in some way, to shifts in U.S. strategy in Asia. If we understand the United States' Indo-Pacific strategy as essentially a way for the United States to maintain control over China by strengthening its network of alliances in the region—and thereby neutralizing China's threat to U.S. global leadership—then we can trace the origins of the strategy back to the Obama administration's “rebalance to Asia.” Through examining the diplomatic and security vision and strategies of the government in South Korea under Lee Myung-bak, it is possible to gain insight into how Seoul understood the concept of an Indo-Pacific region during this initial period. The Lee government sought to establish a comprehensive South Korea–U.S. alliance based on shared values and trust that moved beyond mere security cooperation, and this approach aligned with Obama's efforts to modernize U.S. alliances and expand global partnerships in the rebalance strategy. To achieve its goal, the Lee administration pursued a “New Asia Diplomacy” strategy, which can be thought of as the prototype of South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy aimed at expanding diplomatic networks across Asia.⁵

After Park Geun-hye assumed office in 2013, South Korea became increasingly willing to participate in U.S. efforts to contain China. Thus, the positions of the United States, China, and South Korea became

⁵ Cheong Wa Dae, “Bon guedoe orun ‘xin Asia oigyo’ gusang” [The “New Asian Diplomacy” Initiative Is on the Right Track], Republic of Korea, Policy Briefing, October 19, 2009 ~ <https://www.korea.kr/news/policyNewsView.do?newsId=148678031>.

progressively clearer. Initially, President Park had proposed the “Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative” to achieve the administration’s stated national security goals of promoting cooperation in the subregion. However, the initiative, which placed equal importance on China and the United States, proved difficult to reconcile with the U.S. rebalance aimed at containing China.⁶ Autonomy in South Korean diplomacy with regard to the United States and China reached its peak in 2015, when Park climbed the steps to the balcony of the Gate of Heavenly Peace overlooking Tiananmen Square at China’s 70th anniversary celebration of the end of World War II. As Park’s term neared its end, South Korea began to strengthen its deterrence capabilities vis-à-vis North Korea in response to the North’s continued nuclear testing, and it attempted to improve relations with Japan. As seen in the current government’s efforts to reduce tensions with Japan regarding historical issues,⁷ trilateral cooperation with both Japan and the United States is integral to the Yoon administration’s Indo-Pacific strategy.

After Donald Trump was inaugurated as U.S. president, the U.S. “rebalance to Asia” evolved into an “Indo-Pacific strategy.” In South Korea, President Moon Jae-in, who took office around the same time, struggled to determine a response to this new U.S. strategy.⁸ Major priorities of the new Moon administration included promoting a peace process on the Korean Peninsula and the expansion of multilateral diplomacy. Accordingly, Moon endorsed building a “Responsible Northeast Asia Plus Community” within the region as well as pursued strengthened external relations through his administration’s New Southern and New Northern Policies.⁹ Nevertheless, given that the administration’s primary focus was the establishment of a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula, it exercised caution to the greatest extent possible in officially engaging with the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy.¹⁰ Thus, the Moon administration had no

⁶ Lee Soo-hyung, “Hankukui intae junlyak inshikgwa jungchek byunhwa” [South Korea’s Indo-Pacific Strategy: Strategic Perception and Policy Changes], in *Galdenggwa gongjonui indotaepyungyang—gagukui intae junlyak* [The Indo-Pacific of Conflict and Coexistence—Each Country’s Indo-Pacific Strategy], ed. Jaeho Hwang (Seoul: Myeongin Munhwasa, 2022), 277–78.

⁷ On December 28, 2015, during the Park Geun-hye administration, the South Korean and Japanese governments reached a settlement regarding the comfort women issue.

⁸ Blue House, *Gukgwa anbo junlyak* [National Security Strategy] (Seoul, 2018).

⁹ The New Southern Policy sought to improve relations with countries to Korea’s south such as the members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and India, while the New Northern Policy focused on strengthening cooperation with the countries of Eurasia.

¹⁰ Lee, “Hankukui intae junlyak inshikgwa jungchek byunhwa,” 282–84.

choice but to take the ambiguous middle ground, pursuing “Indo-Pacific cooperation” in the “Asia-Pacific region.”¹¹

Since Biden’s inauguration, competition between the United States and China has become even more intense. Despite Biden adopting a gentler approach toward U.S. allies compared to Trump, who overtly pressured them, taking a hard line on China has become a position of bipartisan support. Furthermore, the United States is currently seeking to connect the two sides of its global strategy in the Pacific and Atlantic theaters, and at the same time it is also enlarging these two axes, with the Asia-Pacific axis expanding to include the whole Indo-Pacific region and the Atlantic axis centered around NATO and spreading eastward. It was against this backdrop that South Korea was invited to the June 2022 NATO summit. Biden also emphasized trilateral cooperation between South Korea, the United States, and Japan during his visit to South Korea in May 2022 and in his most recent visit in April 2023. The emergence of the conservative Yoon administration in South Korea has facilitated a comprehensive revision of the country’s foreign policy to one that prioritizes its alliance with the United States rather than seeks to maintain a balance between the two rival powers.

The Yoon Administration’s Indo-Pacific Strategy

The Yoon administration’s Indo-Pacific strategy plays a crucial role in realizing the president’s vision of South Korea as a global pivotal state that embodies international order and universal values. This initiates from the idea to strengthen solidarity with Western countries that share the values of freedom, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law to put the strategy into practice.

South Korea’s Indo-Pacific strategy document consists of four sections, including the strategy’s background and rationale (section one); its vision, principles of cooperation, and regional scope (section two); its “core lines of effort” (section three); and a conclusion (section four).¹² Section one

¹¹ During a press conference following the South Korea–U.S. summit on June 30, 2019, President Moon stated, “The Asia-Pacific region is a core region for maintaining peace and prosperity for both countries. Under the regional cooperation principles of openness, inclusiveness, and transparency, we have agreed to put forth harmonious cooperation between Korea’s New Southern Policy and the United States’ Indo-Pacific Strategy.” Moon Jae-in, “Opening Remarks by President Moon Jae-in at Joint Press Conference following Korea-U.S. Summit,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Republic of Korea), June 30, 2019 ~ https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5674/view.do?seq=319902.

¹² Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Republic of Korea), *Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region*.

highlights the strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific region, while section two outlines the strategy’s vision of a free, peaceful, and prosperous Indo-Pacific region as well as the principles of cooperation, which are inclusiveness, trust, and reciprocity. Section two also defines the strategy’s regional scope, which extends beyond the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia to the North Pacific region, Southeast Asia, South Asia, Oceania, the eastern coast of Africa on the Indian Ocean, Europe, and Central and South America. Additionally, this section specifies the government’s plans to develop a network of strategic partnerships tailored to each region.

In section three, the strategy aims to implement nine “core lines of effort” to fulfill the government’s vision under the three principles of cooperation. These consist of pledges by the government to:

- build a regional order based on norms and rules,
- cooperate in promoting the rule of law and human rights,
- strengthen regional nonproliferation and counterterrorism efforts,
- expand comprehensive security cooperation,
- build economic security networks,
- strengthen cooperation in science and technology and close the digital gap,
- lead regional cooperation on climate change and energy security,
- engage in “contributive diplomacy” through tailored development partnerships, and
- promote mutual understanding and exchanges.

Overall, multiple characteristics define South Korea’s Indo-Pacific strategy. First, South Korea’s Indo-Pacific strategy reflects the country’s status as an important middle power and aims to fulfill the expectations placed on the country by the international community. South Korea’s position as the world’s tenth-largest economy, along with its growing cultural influence, particularly through the global popularity of K-pop, has helped establish it as a major player in the Indo-Pacific region.¹³

Second, the strategy is an upgraded version of South Korea’s regional cooperation policy. It is not an effort to contain China, nor is it a security strategy. Rather, the strategy is a new plan to strengthen the

¹³ Choe Wongi (statement, 5th session of the Global Strategy and Cooperation Dialogue, Seoul, March 23, 2023).

country's role and expand its involvement in the Indo-Pacific region.¹⁴ Whereas South Korea's regional cooperation had traditionally been limited to members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the new strategy aims to expand the geographic scope of its cooperation to the entire Indo-Pacific region, as well as expand areas of cooperation.

Third, this strategy moves beyond attempting to manage North Korea and seeks to contribute to the international community as a whole. In the past, responding to the North Korean threat was naturally the top priority of South Korean diplomacy, and a significant portion of the country's diplomatic efforts were dedicated to dealing with North Korea-related issues. Although the North is still important to the Yoon administration's diplomatic strategy, the government has also begun to consider what role South Korea can play in maintaining a rules-based international order in cooperation with many countries around the world, given South Korea's growing national power.¹⁵ Furthermore, by prioritizing "contributive diplomacy," such as cooperation on development and aid for developing countries within the framework of the Indo-Pacific strategy, South Korea aims to expand its responsibilities and role internationally.

Future Challenges and Direction of South Korea's Indo-Pacific Strategy

The Yoon administration is likely to encounter challenges in implementing its Indo-Pacific strategy, which has been criticized as being a hodgepodge of Indo-Pacific strategies proposed by other countries, considering that the strategy's title, structure, and context present a lot of similarities with those of other states. Therefore, Seoul should pursue several policy efforts to overcome these possible hurdles.

Challenges. First, it is crucial that South Korea coordinate policy with the United States as an ally. In particular, appropriately managing and effectively adjusting U.S. expectations in terms of burden sharing on, for example, economic and regional security issues will be key for Seoul to successfully implement its Indo-Pacific strategy.¹⁶ Moreover, the government

¹⁴ Choe (statement, 5th session of the Global Strategy and Cooperation Dialogue).

¹⁵ Jung-Yeop Woo (statement, 2nd session of the Global Strategy and Cooperation Dialogue, Seoul, March 23, 2023).

¹⁶ Choe Wongi, "Indo-taepungyang junlyakgwa Hangukui jiyokjuk yokhak hwakdae chujin bangkyang" [Indo-Pacific Strategy and the Direction for South Korea's Regional Role Expansion], Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security (Republic of Korea), April 5, 2023, 3.

must be mindful of the speed with which it implements the strategy and the direction that the strategy ultimately takes.¹⁷

Second, by aligning its own strategy with the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy, South Korea has, in effect, shifted its position from strategic ambiguity to strategic clarity. As a result, South Korea must also consider the costs in terms of its relationship with China when adopting a position of strategic clarity that favors the United States and be prepared for China to react. Notably, Seoul must consider whether it will be able to pursue its North Korea policy without Beijing's help, whether it will be able to bear tangible and intangible economic pressure from China, and whether the United States will be able to provide South Korea with comprehensive support if South Korea faces pressure from China in diplomacy and security.

Third, there is a possibility that the North Korean issue may become neglected as a result of the strategy's broad focus. One of the chronic predicaments of South Korean diplomacy is that all its diplomatic issues can be connected with North Korea. The Indo-Pacific strategy, however, seems to disregard the North Korean issue. While the Yoon administration has also proposed an "audacious plan" to improve inter-Korean relations, it is placing more emphasis on wider international cooperation by focusing much more on the bigger picture.¹⁸

Fourth, the future of other countries' Indo-Pacific strategies may influence how South Korea's own strategy for the region is carried out. Not only does South Korea share the goals and principles of cooperation included in other countries' Indo-Pacific strategies, but it also seeks to position itself as a global pivotal state, demonstrating its willingness and ability to contribute more significantly to the international community. However, the future of all these strategies will be shaped by their own countries' implementation, characteristics, and environments, particularly those of the United States.

Direction. Despite these potential challenges, the Yoon administration must not only further develop Seoul's Indo-Pacific strategy but also use it to South Korea's advantage to ensure its success. Some traits and actions may assist with achieving these gains from the strategy.

¹⁷ It cannot be ruled out that the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy, which includes the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), may be partially altered or even completely scrapped in the event that Joe Biden fails to be re-elected or the Democratic Party is defeated in the upcoming presidential election.

¹⁸ Cho Hanbum (statement, 4th session of the Global Strategy and Cooperation Dialogue, Seoul, March 23, 2023).

First, South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy must be creative. Unlike the previous administration, the current government has no choice but to pursue an Indo-Pacific strategy. It cannot pursue the New Northern Policy because of deteriorated relations with Russia and North Korea, so the only option is to go all in on the New Southern Policy and leapfrog from it to make the Indo-Pacific strategy its signature diplomatic initiative. The current government must naturally shift its focus to the Indo-Pacific region and take the opportunity to push forward with a middle-power strategy in earnest.

Second, it is vital that the Indo-Pacific strategy does not become an all-encompassing “black hole” in South Korean diplomacy. There may be confusion as to whether the Indo-Pacific strategy is a global strategy or a regional one, as its scope covers such a wide geographic area, which stretches from Africa to South America. However, it must, as its name suggests, remain a regional strategy under the Office of the President's comprehensive national security strategy, which includes other diplomatic, unification, and security strategies.

Third, the Yoon administration must integrate various diplomatic infrastructure and institutional mechanisms into its Indo-Pacific strategy that tailor Korean diplomacy to particular groups of countries, including India and other South Asian countries, the Pacific Island nations, ASEAN member states, and Indo-Pacific regional middle powers. In practice, this means, for example, supporting the strengthening of ASEAN as a key regional actor and jointly releasing a “South Korea–ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific.” To promote communication among the countries that are pursuing an Indo-Pacific strategy, it would also do well to create a partnership among the middle powers of the region, including India, Australia, and Canada, and consider the possibility of linking ASEAN with this middle-power group.

Conclusion

Building off the acronym of global pivotal state (GPS), Foreign Minister Park has referred to this pledge by Seoul as the “GPS” (global positioning system) of South Korean foreign policy, thus setting the country's diplomatic trajectory.¹⁹ However, to borrow again from the acronym, only with the

¹⁹ “Park Jin, ‘Hanguken segye 8 gang... guklyuk wising gulmazen GPS oigyo’ [Korea Is in the World's Top 8...GPS Diplomacy Befitting Its National Power and Status], EDaily, April 12, 2023 ~ <https://www.edaily.co.kr/news/read?newsId=01584246635575464&mediaCodeNo=257>.

proper global positioning will South Korea be able to become another type of “GPS”: a global prestigious state. During a summit at the end of April, the leaders of South Korea and the United States announced to the world an upgraded and ambitious alliance between the two partners.²⁰ The Indo-Pacific strategy is a concrete roadmap for South Korea to become this latter kind of GPS.

The idea of the global pivotal state pursued by the Yoon administration refers to a country that, although not a great power, still plays a meaningful role in the global central nervous system. Medically speaking, the central nervous system consists of the brain and the spinal cord, and it acts as the control tower that regulates movement and bodily functions and processes information. Metaphorically, therefore, the current administration seeks to position South Korea as an integral part within this key system for world affairs. However, if it is not successful in doing so, the country will end up as a mere “peripheral nerve” that is easily affected by and only responsive to its environment.²¹ Thus, the immediate task at hand for the Yoon government should be to clearly establish South Korea as the backbone or spine that brings stability and balance to the international system.

With the adoption of its Indo-Pacific strategy, South Korea’s foreign policy has entered a new phase, regardless of which of the scenarios outlined above unfolds in the future. Whether it chooses to become a global pivotal state and part of the backbone of world order, South Korea has a clear contribution to make in the international community. Many see the competition between the United States and China as now in full swing, with Washington using its Indo-Pacific strategy as a “shield” to block the “spear” that is China’s Belt and Road Initiative. Ultimately, South Korea needs a foreign policy direction that it can call its own, one that is based on a sound *raison d’être* and serves the practical interests of the country. South Korea’s plan for the Indo-Pacific region should serve as a catalyst for it to develop its own unique, Korean foreign policy approach. ◆

²⁰ “United States–Republic of Korea Leaders’ Joint Statement,” White House, Press Release, May 21, 2022. ≈ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/05/21/united-states-republic-of-korea-leaders-joint-statement>.

²¹ Jaeho Hwang, “Gulobeol chukchu gukga” [Global Backbone State], *Financial News*, January 31, 2023. ≈ <https://www.fnnews.com/news/202301311806112367>.

Australia's Indo-Pacific Strategy: From Optimism to Hard Balancing

Nick Bisley

Australia was one of the earliest adopters of the Indo-Pacific construct. First emerging in official documents in 2012, the construct by 2017 had become the central geographic concept organizing the country's international engagement. During this time, Canberra's mood toward the region shifted decisively. In the early 2010s, Australia remained optimistic about the region's prospects, even as great-power rivalry resurfaced. Canberra thought that while the geopolitical landscape was going to become more difficult to navigate, stability and prosperity were likely to prevail.

Ten years later, the country's elites are much more pessimistic. Although Australia does not have a formal Indo-Pacific strategy, its approach to the region has moved away from hedging its bets concerning regional risks. In response to the growing power and increasingly assertive behavior of the People's Republic of China (PRC), as well as the rising influence of a set of policy thinkers who are very skeptical of the PRC, Australia hardened its rhetorical posture toward that country and has started to reorient its policy around hard balancing. Notwithstanding the policy consensus around this move—it has strong bipartisan support in the Australian Parliament, and the bureaucracy is of one mind in this regard—there remain significant challenges to its implementation.

This essay will examine Australia's strategic policy in the Indo-Pacific, analyze the dynamics surrounding this policy, and identify the tensions and challenges that Canberra faces in seeking to put a sharper edge on its approach to a region that is both its economic hope and the source of its greatest fears.

The Indo-Pacific

In the 1990s, Australia adopted a policy of engagement toward what was then called the Asia-Pacific.¹ The region, so conceived, remained fixed as both the focal point of Australian international policy and the

NICK BISLEY is the Dean and Head of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences and Professor of International Relations at La Trobe University (Australia). His research and teaching expertise is in Asia's international relations, great-power politics, and Australian foreign and defense policy. He can be reached at <n.bisley@latrobe.edu.au> and on Twitter <@NickBisley>.

¹ Paul Keating, *Engagement: Australia Faces the Asia-Pacific* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000).

articulation of the nation's strategic geography for around two decades.² The Asia-Pacific was the region from which the most opportunity emerged. Australia's 28-year uninterrupted economic expansion from 1992 to 2020 was due primarily to its ability to tap into Asia's explosive economic growth.³ Equally, the sources of its insecurity also came from this region—from terrorism to the spread of infectious diseases to growing geopolitical rivalry.

In 2012, this began to change. The *Australia in the Asian Century* white paper recognized for the first time the Indo-Pacific as a fledging mega-region that was emerging due to the increasing ties between countries near the Indian Ocean and those in the Asia-Pacific.⁴ The concept of the Indo-Pacific region was also explored in Australia's 2013 National Security Strategy and then more fully articulated in the 2013 defense white paper as a "single strategic arc" that was vital to the country's strategic interests.⁵ These first iterations came from left-of-center governments affiliated with the Australian Labor Party. The idea was then embraced by the two main international policy documents produced by conservative Liberal-National Coalition governments: the *Defence White Paper 2016* and *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper*.⁶ In 2019, Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade even reconfigured its organizational structure around the concept.⁷ The Indo-Pacific has since become the only geographic term that senior government representatives use to describe the region.

The swiftness and ubiquity with which "Indo-Pacific" has supplanted "Asia-Pacific" in Australia is striking. The most basic reason behind this relates to its geography and the way in which the country sees the ties that

² Michael Wesley, *The Howard Paradox: Australian Diplomacy in Asia, 1996–2006* (Sydney: ABC Books, 2007).

³ For Australia, the Asia-Pacific entailed the economies and societies in Northeast and Southeast Asia as well as those based in the western Pacific.

⁴ Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (Australia), *Australia in the Asian Century* (Canberra, 2012), 74.

⁵ Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (Australia), *Strong and Secure: A Strategy for Australia's National Security* (Canberra, January 2013) ~ <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2013-01/apo-nid33996.pdf>; and Department of Defence (Australia), *Defence White Paper 2013* (Canberra, 2013), 7–9, 25, available at <https://www.defence.gov.au/about/strategic-planning/defence-white-paper>.

⁶ Department of Defence (Australia), *Defence White Paper 2016* (Canberra, 2016), available at <https://www.defence.gov.au/about/strategic-planning/defence-white-paper>; and Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Australia), *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper* (Canberra, 2017) ~ <https://www.dfat.gov.au/publications/minisite/2017-foreign-policy-white-paper/fpwhitepaper/pdf/2017-foreign-policy-white-paper.pdf>.

⁷ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Australia), "2020 Organizational Structure" ~ <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/dfat-org-chart-executive.pdf>.

bind the Indian Ocean and Asia-Pacific as crucial to its interests. Indeed, the Indo-Pacific is not a new term for Australia—it was in common use in the nineteenth century. At that time, the Australian colonies were acutely aware of their continent’s “two ocean geography” because many of the key maritime routes to Great Britain departed from Perth and linked to British India, while the centers of population and wealth were on the Pacific coast. Today, as trade and investment connect factories in Asia with global markets, and as commodity inputs, such as hydrocarbons and iron ore, tie together the once discrete regions of the Indian Ocean and the Asia-Pacific, Australia’s location gives particular salience to the empirical reality of growing regional connectivity.

But the Indo-Pacific has a greater meaning within the Australian context. The idea is not merely a description of a geostrategic space but also a strategy for managing that space. If a bigger strategic domain has been created by shifting patterns of trade and economic development and by the growing power and operating spheres of major powers like China and India, then the Indo-Pacific has, for key Australian elites, a strategic purpose. It is a term that ultimately refers to managing the rise of China. As Rory Medcalf, one of the more articulate advocates of the idea, has noted, the Indo-Pacific is about organizing a collective response to China “without resorting to capitulation or conflict.”⁸ Though this is not formally Australian policy, the strategic construct of the Indo-Pacific has gained purchase in Canberra because of the way it illuminates both the idea of a bigger, more connected region and a strategy for navigating the country’s path within that region.

The idea of the Indo-Pacific also appeals to Australian policy elites for domestic reasons. When conceptions of the Asia-Pacific included Australia, they did so in ways that made the country appear peripheral to broader regional strategic dynamics. The Asia-Pacific’s center of gravity was Northeast Asia, and Australia’s location ten thousand kilometers away created a sense of marginality. The Indo-Pacific construct gives the country a much greater sense of significance as it shifts the pivot point of the region more toward Australia. This matters not just for reasons of strategic narcissism but also because it strengthens the hand of policymakers in the internal arguments over resource distribution within the federal government. Finally, the Indo-Pacific idea also allows the country to dodge a domestic cultural divide that has long bedeviled its regional

⁸ Rory Medcalf, *Contest for the Indo-Pacific: Why China Won't Map the Future* (Melbourne: La Trobe University Press, 2020), 3.

engagement—the unease of some Australians about being a part of Asia. To be clear, not all Australians share this sentiment, least of all the millions of people who have migrated from Asia to make Australia their home. However, the cultural divisions are real, and the Indo-Pacific provides a neat and appealing way of embracing the region without having to confront the question of Australia’s place in Asia or Asian-ness.

From Optimism to Hard Balancing

Australia has long recognized that a stable and favorable strategic balance of power in Asia is central to its security. In the early years of the 21st century, Canberra identified the economic opportunities presented by China’s economic revival and was not especially concerned by the prospects of what a more prosperous PRC might mean for its long-term interest in regional stability. This reflected both a sense that China was at least a generation away from having the wherewithal to create a shift in the strategic balance and the moderation that had dominated PRC foreign policy thinking since the late 1970s. Even after the 2008 global financial crisis rapidly accelerated Beijing’s relative standing in world affairs, and the PRC began to adopt a more confident and, at times, assertive approach to pursuing its regional interests, Canberra maintained a high level of confidence about the region’s prospects. Australia sought to develop strategic partnerships with all of Asia’s major powers (the United States, Japan, China, and India), as symbolized by the 2014 signature of free trade agreements with Japan, South Korea, and the PRC. Even as the reality of Chinese president Xi Jinping’s foreign policy reorientation became more obvious, Canberra believed that the old order could and likely would be maintained, necessitating only minor adjustments to its approach. Although it was published in the year that marked a shift in Australia’s strategic tone, the 2017 foreign policy white paper reflects the clearest articulation of the country’s sense of the region’s trajectory, which rested on the belief that the United States would continue to be willing and able to underwrite regional stability for the foreseeable future.⁹

In 2020, in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Australian government published a defense and strategic policy reset.¹⁰ While reiterating that the main forces to which Australian policy should respond

⁹ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Australia), *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper*.

¹⁰ Department of Defence (Australia), *2020 Defence Strategic Update* (Canberra, July 2020) ≈ <https://www.defence.gov.au/about/strategic-planning/2020-defence-strategic-update>.

remained the same as in the 2016 defense white paper, the document was prompted by the realization that geopolitical competition had intensified at a much faster rate than anticipated just three years earlier. The risks of instability were greater than expected, with coercion already evident in the region. And to the forces identified earlier, Australia's planners recognized that the pandemic's economic and strategic consequences would further accelerate the negative trends at play. The document makes clear how benignly Canberra had viewed things previously, noting that it had assumed a ten-year strategic warning period before a major attack on Australia and stating that "this is no longer an appropriate basis for defense planning."¹¹ The potential for conflict, whether through accident or strategic design, had risen markedly, and the document sets out how Australia would respond to this much bleaker assessment of the region.

What led Australia to shift its views and see things much more darkly than hitherto? Below the surface of public comment, there remains nagging doubt about the long-term reliability of the United States that is driven, in part, by the tumultuous presidency of Donald Trump. Australia remains committed to its U.S. alliance—in many respects, it is bound to the United States, being both dependent on the United States for security support and obligated to assist its alliance partner—but there is a growing realization among policy elites that Australia would benefit from developing greater independent strategic capability. Although the pandemic and its consequences are new to the global landscape (and not seen by most elites in Canberra as revolutionary in and of themselves), they are likely to be accelerants of strategic risk. However, the principal driver of change in Australia's foreign policy is a significant shift in attitude toward China.

In 2017, the Australian government began to alter its rhetoric on China. This shift was evident in Foreign Minister Julie Bishop's Fullerton Lecture in Singapore in March of that year.¹² In June, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's keynote address at the Shangri-La Dialogue continued the critical tone. To the PRC, Turnbull lectured, "Just as modern China was founded in 1949 on an assertion of national sovereignty, so will 21st Century China best succeed by respecting the sovereignty of others and in so doing build a

¹¹ Department of Defence (Australia), *2020 Defence Strategic Update*, 14.

¹² Julie Bishop, "Change and Uncertainty in the Indo-Pacific: Strategic Challenges and Opportunities" (28th IISS Fullerton Lecture, Singapore, March 13, 2017) ~ <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/julie-bishop/speech/change-and-uncertainty-indo-pacific-strategic-challenges-and-opportunities>.

reservoir of trust and cooperation with its neighbours.”¹³ Defense Minister Marise Payne’s speech at the Seoul Defense Dialogue in September that year furthered the public criticism of China, stating that in the South China Sea and elsewhere the PRC was acting “above the law.”¹⁴

Australia was also concerned about PRC activity within Australia, in particular interference in the political process by figures linked to the Chinese Communist Party and by PRC investment in strategic elements of the Australian economy. Consequently, the government passed legislation on foreign interference in 2018.¹⁵ In August of that year, the government also decided to ban Chinese firms Huawei and ZTE from participating in the rollout and operation of the country’s new 5G telecommunications network.¹⁶ Contrary to much speculation, the decision was an Australian one and not influenced by the United States or other partners.¹⁷ The culmination of this “reality check” period of Australia’s China policy¹⁸ was the ill-planned declaration by the Australian foreign minister, in April 2020, that there needed to be an independent review of the origins of the pandemic and that the World Health Organization (WHO) should not lead it.¹⁹ Australia was publicly pointing the finger at the PRC, and it did so alone, having not developed a coalition to support its position. Australia also perceived the WHO to be in China’s corner, adding to the sense that adversarial relations with the PRC were almost inevitable.

This led to a serious deterioration in the bilateral relationship. Canberra essentially had no meaningful direct political or diplomatic interaction with

¹³ Malcolm Turnbull (keynote address, 16th IISS Asia Security Summit, Shangri-La Dialogue, June 3, 2017) ~ <https://www.malcolmturnbull.com.au/media/keynote-address-at-the-16th-iiss-asia-security-summit-shangri-la-dialogue>.

¹⁴ Marise Payne (keynote address, 6th Seoul Defence Dialogue, Seoul, September 11, 2017) ~ <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/minister/marise-payne/speeches/sixth-seoul-defence-dialogue-keynote>.

¹⁵ Australian Parliament, *National Security Legislation (Espionage and Foreign Interference) Act 2018*, no. 67, 2018 ~ <https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/C2018A00067>.

¹⁶ Michael Slezak and Ariel Bogle, “Huawei Banned from 5G Mobile Infrastructure Rollout in Australia” ABC News (Australia), August 23, 2018 ~ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-08-23/huawei-banned-from-providing-5g-mobile-technology-australia/10155438>.

¹⁷ Danielle Cave, “Huawei’s ‘Trust Deficit’ Kept It Out of Australia’s 5G Network” *Global Asia* 14, no. 3 (2019) ~ https://www.globalasia.org/v14no3/cover/huaweis-trust-deficit-kept-it-out-of-australias-5g-network_danielle-cave.

¹⁸ Rory Medcalf, “Australia and China: Understanding the Reality Check,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 73, no. 2 (2019): 109–18.

¹⁹ Brett Worthington, “Marise Payne Calls for Global Inquiry into China’s Handling of the Coronavirus Outbreak” ABC News (Australia), April 19, 2020 ~ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-04-19/payne-calls-for-inquiry-china-handling-of-coronavirus-covid-19/12162968>.

Beijing between 2018 and 2022.²⁰ And during that time frame, Australia was on the receiving end of selective economic coercion, which affected exports of wine, coal, beef, and barley. The election of Australian prime minister Anthony Albanese in 2022 has produced a slow but perceptible defrosting of the relationship, but the underlying attitude within Canberra remains firmly in place.

There are four main reasons behind the shift in attitude toward China. First, there was growing concern that the PRC was taking advantage of the openness of Australian society to exert influence in the country and shape Australian policy. Second, PRC behavior in the region indicated that the optimism about the ability of the old order to constrain China was misplaced. Third, Australia no longer had confidence that China's interests in international stability and positive relations with other countries would ensure a relatively benign Chinese approach to foreign policy. Finally, Australian views on China were hardened by the growing authoritarianism of Xi Jinping and its regional and global implications.

Australia's core strategic aims for the region remain as they have been for some time. These are to have a stable and favorable strategic balance, an open economy, and a broadly liberal and rules-based approach to managing the international order. But the much gloomier assessment of the region, centered on concerns about the PRC, has meant that Australia has opted to take a different approach to achieving these aims.

The defense policy reset provides the clearest articulation of the implications of the shifting mood in Canberra. Australia aims to increase its warfighting capability, develop a greater level of independence in force projection, enhance its capacity to work with other countries besides the United States, and place a particular emphasis on its approaches toward its immediate neighborhoods of Southeast Asia and the South Pacific. Whereas in the past Australia's defense and strategic policy had a broader regional emphasis and, indeed, a global focus owing to the sense that its local geographic area was relatively stable and peaceful, now perceived instability is drawing the country closer to home. Australia intends to increase defense spending over the coming two decades to fund the greatest expansion in its military outside of wartime. This includes acquiring a large fleet of F-35 aircraft, replacing and expanding the number and capacity of its submarines, purchasing long-range strike missiles, and developing

²⁰ Jennifer Hewett, Michael Smith, and Phillip Coorey, "China Puts Malcolm Turnbull's Government into the Deep Freeze," *Australian Financial Review*, April 11, 2018. <https://www.afr.com/world/asia/chinas-big-chill-for-australia-20180411-h0ymwb>.

area-denial and cyber capabilities. In short, Australia sees its region as one beset with the risk of high-intensity warfare and is embarking on an ambitious program to strengthen its military to defend its interests at home and in the region.

A second way in which Australia's new strategic approach is visible is in the government's desire to develop multistate coalitions to respond to the China challenge. The re-emergence of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, now known colloquially as the Quad, is the most visible aspect of this. Australia walked away from the first iteration of the grouping in 2007 but has been an active proponent of it since its resuscitation in 2017. The Quad is appealing to Australia because it is a multilateral grouping of major countries that, as officials say, are "like-minded" regarding the regional order.²¹ But Australia's participation in the Quad is also a way of harnessing India's strategic interests to support its preferred regional setting. Canberra is keen to increase the functionality of the Quad—at this point it still remains primarily a signaling exercise with little meaningful impact on strategy—and also possibly expand the grouping, as the government is acutely aware of the need to broaden the base of political support to maintain the existing order.

Perhaps the most notable illustration of these two trends was the surprise creation of the Australia–United Kingdom–United States (AUKUS) pact in 2021.²² This curious piece of minilateralism is intended, in the ambitious language of its launch, to "help sustain peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region."²³ To achieve this vision, it has established two "pillars" of activity. The first entails the United States and the UK supporting Australia to acquire, deploy, and sustain a nuclear-powered submarine fleet. The second pillar involves an ambitious program of collaboration to develop and improve a range of advanced technologies to further the countries' shared strategic goals. These technologies include undersea autonomous vehicles, quantum technology, hypersonic weapons, and defense innovation.²⁴ AUKUS remains putative in terms of its substantive impact on

²¹ See "Quad Leaders' Summit Communique," September 24, 2021, available at <https://nswliberal.org.au/news/quad-leaders-summit-communique>.

²² For an excellent summary of the surprise and fallout, see "An AUKUS Surprise—Best of the Interpreter 2021," Lowy Institute, Interpreter, December 29, 2021 ~ <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/aucus-surprise-best-interpreter-2021>.

²³ "Joint Leaders' Statement on AUKUS," White House, Press Release, September 16, 2021 ~ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/09/15/joint-leaders-statement-on-aucus>.

²⁴ See Peter K. Lee and Alice Nason, "365 Days of AUKUS: Progress, Challenges and Prospects," United States Studies Centre, University of Sydney, September 14, 2022 ~ <https://www.uscc.edu.au/analysis/365-days-of-aucus-progress-challenges-and-prospects>.

the region's strategic balance—the capabilities it will bring to bear are many years from realization—but as a statement of the anxiety levels in Canberra about the region and the ability to secure Australian interests, it could not be more clear-cut.

A third new development has been a refocus on the Pacific, what Australia initially styled as its “Pacific Step-up.”³⁴ While framed in terms of a broader recommitment to shared goals in development and stability in Australia's immediate neighborhood, the move was prompted by geopolitical concerns and, in particular, the growing influence of China in that region. This renewed attention on the South Pacific entails increased aid and development programs, greater and more sustained engagement with the region, labor mobility programs, and infrastructure support. The last element includes, among other examples, constructing the Coral Sea cable that provides telecommunications to Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea and a promise to redevelop the Lombrum naval base on Manus Island in Papua New Guinea.

During the optimistic phase of its regional strategic policy, Australia sought and indeed succeeded in establishing high-quality and seemingly durable positive ties with all the region's great powers. It has since recalibrated its approach to Asia's key states. While the Albanese government has successfully improved the diplomatic tone and tenor with China, there is no sense that the relationship can return to the past. Alongside this, Australia is seeking to significantly enhance its relationship with India, and in recent years it has emphasized strengthening ties to New Delhi across defense, economics, education, and people-to-people links. It is also working to further strengthen its already close relationship with Japan.

Finally, institutional engagement has long been and remains a centerpiece of Australia's engagement with the Indo-Pacific region. Australia is a member of every regional grouping to which it is eligible to belong and has played a key leadership role in many of these entities, including in the formation of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum. Canberra continues to see the region's institutional architecture not just as critical to increasing its influence but as a means of securing its preferred regional order.

Conclusion: Challenges in Australia's Strategy for the Indo-Pacific

Australia's core interests in the Indo-Pacific region have not changed significantly—it wants to preserve the regional order that prevailed following Sino-U.S. rapprochement and the end of the Cold War. This is

defined in the minds of Australian policy elites as entailing a favorable and stable balance of power underwritten by U.S. power, an open and broadly liberal economic order, an accepted set of “rules of the road” governing international behavior, and reasonable alignment with the broader liberal international order. The problem is that China’s wealth, power, and ambition are understood by Canberra to present a profound threat to those arrangements in a much shorter time horizon than before. Australia has thus replaced an optimistic hedging strategy with one focused overtly on the hard balancing of PRC power.

Since 2017, Australia has described its regional strategy as an Indo-Pacific policy. Yet the substance of this regional strategy remains principally focused on the geopolitical space to the east of the Malacca Strait. Though India plays a more visible part in policy thinking and planning than ever before, Australia’s actions and investment speak more clearly: Australian regional policy is all about East Asia and the South Pacific. This policy may have broader resonance, with nonresident powers like India and, more recently, the UK and France playing a role in helping Australia and others sustain the kind of region they hope for. But that region is ultimately not one that genuinely interconnects the Indian Ocean and Asia-Pacific regions. For one, Australia simply cannot afford a truly Indo-Pacific strategy, and second, and more importantly, it would be a dangerous distraction to be too focused on the Indian Ocean side.

But a much more significant question that Australia and its partners face is whether a hard-balancing approach to the region can be sustained over the long term. The most immediate challenge for Australia will be financial—can it afford to pay for this more military-focused regional policy? Although its economic circumstances were strong going into 2020 and it weathered the Covid-19 pandemic relatively well, Australia, like many countries, has taken on substantial public debt. More importantly, like in many advanced economies, Australia’s share of government spending on health and social services continues to climb. There remains a strong political consensus on the importance of the social safety net and its expansion, which will mean that funding the type of defense policy the government thinks is necessary will require significant political trade-offs. Recent history does not provide any reason to think that this will be easy to achieve. Equally, although there is a reasonable degree of bipartisanship for the broad contours of Australian policy, the implementation of elements such as AUKUS is already causing challenges for the Australian Labor Party government, including from labor unions and parts of the

party's left-wing base.²⁵ This is not to say that balancing these interests, financially or politically, will be impossible, but the domestic foundation of the approach to the Indo-Pacific region that the country is pursuing cannot be taken for granted and will require significant management over many decades.

Australia has diverse regional interests and hitherto has been adept at managing the complexity of its economic and security relations. Australia has also forged effective bilateral ties with every country of significance in the region and, in its multilateral engagement, has been able to further advance its regional interests in a cooperative manner. The move toward hard balancing and its explicit focus on China as the precipitant of regional instability will make managing regional relations considerably more difficult for Australia. Asia is a region of diverse political systems that does not conform to a neat Cold War-style division between democracy and autocracy. Equally, many countries in the region retain significant economic ties with the PRC and have China as a neighbor that cannot be wished away, which gives them a rather different calculus for dealing with Beijing. As Australia seeks to improve its standing in Southeast Asia and the South Pacific and advance its ambitions for climate change mitigation or economic cooperation, for example, in regional forums, the choices it has made in relation to the PRC and the broader region will have side costs that are likely to hinder the efficacy of its diplomacy and ability to advance those interests. ♦

²⁵ Tess Ikonou, "Unions Question Labor over AUKUS Nuclear Submarines," *Canberra Times*, March 28, 2023 ~ <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/8139050/unions-question-labor-over-aukus-nuclear-submarines>.

Indonesia's Indo-Pacific Aspirations and the Reality of Its (Non)strategy

Natalie Sambhi

Amid the rapidly evolving environment characterized by multipolarity, increased geopolitical rivalry, accelerated military modernization, changing economic fortunes, and complex environmental pressures, Indonesia has endeavored to remain optimistic about its place in the region. To this end, its leaders have formulated the country's own interpretation of the Indo-Pacific, the geopolitical construct spanning the Indian and Pacific Oceans, to maximize Indonesia's role in shaping this environment within its means and values.

While Indonesia strives to play an active role in the region and be a leader in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), it does so guided by principles and domestic interests rather than a strategy. Many of its Indo-Pacific multilateral efforts are extensions of domestic imperatives. It is expected that states will pursue foreign policy objectives that serve national affairs; however, in Indonesia's case, its deep-seated attachment to ASEAN centrality as well as its upcoming election have shaped, if not constrained, its ability to breathe life into its Indo-Pacific construct. Because the country also lacks strong military power and economic heft, its regional approach is reliant on diplomacy and norms.¹ So far, this Indo-Pacific approach has been developed and tested under only one president, Joko Widodo (also known as Jokowi), so it remains to be seen whether it becomes part of Indonesia's legacy.

Indonesia's Principled Indo-Pacific Vision

The Jokowi administration's first formal articulation of the Indo-Pacific construct was unveiled in January 2018 by Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi as a "free, open, inclusive, and comprehensive" ecosystem that links the

NATALIE SAMBHI is Executive Director of Verve Research and a Nonresident Fellow in the Brookings Institution's Foreign Policy Program (Australia). She can be reached at <natalie@ververesearch.org> or on Twitter <@securityscholar>.

¹ 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), 48.

Indian and Pacific Oceans and acts as a “cooperation umbrella.”² At a summit between India and ASEAN a few weeks later, Jokowi further added that the Indo-Pacific should be built in an “open, transparent, inclusive manner based on the habit of dialogue.”³ Most importantly, the Indo-Pacific should be devoid of “unhealthy rivalries” that lead to “power projection.” In addition to this vision, Indonesia released the “Indo-Pacific Cooperation Concept” in late 2018, which focuses on cooperation in three areas: the maritime domain, connectivity to spur economic growth, and the Sustainable Development Goals target.⁴ The president explained that Indonesia’s push for maritime cooperation in various forums was an extension of its own national maritime vision.

The inherent maritime focus and promotion of multipolarity in the Indo-Pacific are fundamental for an archipelagic nation at the center of the Indian and Pacific Oceans that has invested in building ties with rising powers such as India. Although Indonesia has long-held foreign policy tenets that privilege a maritime, archipelagic outlook (known as *wawasan nusantara*), the Indo-Pacific construct modernizes these tenets to the country’s geostrategic reality, giving them meaning in a regional context.⁵ Indonesia has also underscored the need for ASEAN to remain central to the Indo-Pacific. Rather than reinvent the wheel of regional architecture, existing ASEAN-centric regional bodies (particularly the ASEAN Regional Forum and East Asia Summit) and ASEAN instruments (such as the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia) should provide the basis for the Indo-Pacific’s rules and norms.

From Indonesia’s perspective, the Indo-Pacific construct is designed and functions to mitigate the negative impacts of great- and rising-power competition—not only between the United States and China but also between China and India as well as China and Japan. ASEAN centrality attempts to ensure that smaller states, disproportionately affected by such competition, maximize their agency. The region will also benefit, in theory,

² Retno Marsudi, “Indonesia: Partner for Prosperity, Peace and Security,” *Jakarta Post*, January 11, 2018 ~ <https://www.thejakartapost.com/academia/2018/01/10/full-text-indonesia-partner-for-peace-security-prosperity.html>.

³ “Presiden Jokowi ingin kemitraan ASEAN-India ciptakan kestabilan kawasan Indo-Pasifik” [President Jokowi Wants ASEAN-India Partnership to Create Stability in the Indo-Pacific Region], Cabinet Secretariat of the Republic of Indonesia, Press Release, January 25, 2018 ~ <https://setkab.go.id/presiden-jokowi-ingin-kemitraan-asean-india-ciptakan-kestabilan-kawasan-indo-pasifik>.

⁴ “Indo-Pacific Cooperation Concept Focuses on Cooperation, Not Rivalry: President Jokowi,” Cabinet Secretariat of the Republic of Indonesia, Press Release, November 15, 2018 ~ <https://setkab.go.id/en/indo-pacific-cooperation-concept-focuses-on-cooperation-not-rivalry-president-jokowi>.

⁵ See John G. Butcher and R.E. Elson, *Sovereignty and the Sea: How Indonesia Became an Archipelagic State* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2017).

from more closely enmeshing Asia-Pacific bodies with Indian Ocean homologues such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association. According to Indonesia's early pronouncements on the Indo-Pacific, cooperation would be encouraged by a "building blocks approach" consisting of strengthening bilateral and plurilateral interactions between states, strengthening regional groupings such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association, and creating linkages between those forms of cooperation through ASEAN-led mechanisms.

As other analysts have pointed out, the Indonesian characteristics of such a formulation are found in its flexibility and openness; it neither endorses nor denies other Indo-Pacific visions.⁶ In contrast to that of other states, the Indonesian vision has also expressly avoided singling out particular actors. Indonesia vehemently rejects the use of an Indo-Pacific framework as a containment strategy for China.⁷ Its approach to the Indo-Pacific is also inherently pragmatic, despite being ambitious, and avoids any ideological language. While Indonesia maintains a democratic political system at home, "free" does not mean free in the liberal democratic sense.

In addition to developing its own articulation of the region, Indonesia has been instrumental in establishing a Southeast Asian position on the Indo-Pacific.⁸ The "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific" (AOIP), which articulates ASEAN's view of its centrality to the Indo-Pacific and its vision for peace and prosperity, was launched at the forum's annual summit in Bangkok in June 2019.⁹ The AOIP focuses on maritime cooperation, connectivity, UN Sustainable Development Goals,¹⁰ and economic and other areas of cooperation, such as the digital economy, climate change, and disaster management. Although many of these areas are relevant to all Southeast Asian nations, they appear to mirror Indonesia's Indo-Pacific priorities. Also like Indonesia's vision, a key feature of the document is that it does not single out China, maintaining the region's characteristic nonalignment.

⁶ See, for example, Evan Laksmana, "An Indo-Pacific Construct with Indonesian Characteristics," Australian Strategic Policy Institute, Strategist, February 6, 2018 ~ <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/indo-pacific-construct-indonesian-characteristics>.

⁷ Retno Marsudi, "The Global Disorder: An Indonesia Perspective" (keynote speech, Pacific Economic Cooperation Council XXV general meeting, Jakarta, May 7–8, 2018).

⁸ Evan Laksmana, "Indonesia's Indo-Pacific Vision Is a Call for ASEAN to Stick Together Instead of Picking Sides," *South China Morning Post*, November 20, 2018 ~ <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/geopolitics/article/2173934/indonesias-indo-pacific-vision-call-asean-stick-together>.

⁹ ASEAN Secretariat, "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific," June 23, 2019 ~ https://asean.org/asean2020/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/ASEAN-Outlook-on-the-Indo-Pacific_FINAL_22062019.pdf.

¹⁰ See UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Sustainable Development, "The 17 Goals" ~ <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>.

Since Indonesia unveiled its Indo-Pacific vision, other states have offered their interpretations of the Indo-Pacific and attempted to institutionalize these approaches. Indonesia has been wary of the ways in which these alternative visions and minilateral groupings, such as the Quad, may be construed by China as provocative.¹¹ Of key concern is that these minilaterals overtly contradict Indonesia's efforts to create an inclusive region, even if they, in the minds of some Indonesian officials, provide a degree of balancing against China's military modernization. As Evan Laksmana has observed, "neither Pax Americana nor Pax Sinica is Indonesia's preferred future for the Indo-Pacific."¹²

While the geostrategic location of the Indo-Pacific lends itself to Indonesian leadership and provides opportunities for the country to attract greater cooperation, a lack of strategy at times hinders Jakarta from maximizing impact and gains. Though Indonesia's vision and championing of the AOIP allow it to help shape the region's normative character, they do not constitute a strategy. As we will see, an approach reliant on principles and domestic imperatives yields mixed results for Indonesia.

An Ad Hoc Approach in Practice

In the absence of a strategy, we can observe Indonesia's Indo-Pacific behavior across several areas to understand how the country is implementing its vision and priorities, as well as cultivating key partners. What can be observed is that when Indonesia focuses its diplomacy, the Indo-Pacific region can reap rewards. One early initiative was the signing of a document titled "Shared Vision on Indonesia-India Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific" by Jokowi and Indian prime minister Narendra Modi in May 2018.¹³ The document was the first time regional states had used the term "Indo-Pacific" in an agreement, demonstrating Indonesia's enthusiasm for promulgating the concept and for investing in its Indian Ocean partners.

By increasing its activity on the Pacific Ocean side, Indonesia has also diverted greater attention to its eastern neighbors, building up ties not just bilaterally with the Pacific Island countries but with the associated

¹¹ The Quad consists of Australia, India, Japan, and the United States.

¹² 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>.

¹³ See "Shared Vision of India-Indonesia Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific," Prime Minister's Office (India), Press Information Bureau, May 18, 2018 ~ <https://pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=179630>.

regional bodies. In addition to releasing its “Pacific Elevation” concept in 2019, designed to increase economic and tourism cooperation between Indonesia and Pacific Island states, Jakarta also chaired the first meeting of the Indonesia-Pacific Forum for Development in Bali in December 2022.¹⁴ Wide-ranging participation in this forum from across the Indo-Pacific, as well as from regional bodies, has the potential to create closer cooperation on Pacific development issues, led by Indonesia and shaped by voices from the Pacific. During the meeting, Indonesia also promised to increase engagement between the Pacific and Pacific regional groups with ASEAN during its year as ASEAN chair, which would help promote “dialogue for peace, security, stability, and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific.”¹⁵

Additionally, Indonesia’s heightened activity in the Pacific highlights its further push into an increasingly contested battleground for political and economic influence between the United States, China, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand. Increasing ties with Pacific Island countries encourages Jakarta’s standing as a nonaligned partner in a region where U.S.-China diplomatic and economic rivalry has intensified.¹⁶ For instance, Retno’s framing of the Indonesia-Pacific Forum for Development as part of implementing the AOIP underscores that ASEAN centrality in the Indo-Pacific, including in the Pacific Ocean, requires constant backing.¹⁷ Indonesia’s efforts in boosting Pacific issues among Indo-Pacific states carry immense value and are commensurate with its growing regional and international clout as well as its desire for greater influence in its near abroad. That said, it is also useful to understand the domestic drivers for this eastward gaze—primarily that Indonesia’s concerted efforts to offer preferential trade agreements, greater infrastructure investment, and development aid to Melanesian countries are designed to quell support within the Pacific Island states for Papuan independence movements.

¹⁴ It is worth highlighting the Indonesia-Pacific Forum for Development’s participants, which include not just ministers and senior officials from thirteen Pacific Island states, Australia, New Zealand, and Timor-Leste but also representatives from the Asian Development Bank, the Melanesian Spearhead Group, the Pacific Islands Forum, and the Pacific Islands Development Forum. The forum also hosted observers from China, France, Japan, South Korea, and the United States.

¹⁵ “The Bali Message for Development Cooperation in the Pacific, the Indonesia-Pacific Forum for Development,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Indonesia), Press Release, December 7, 2022 ~ https://kemlu.go.id/portal/en/read/4233/siaran_pers/the-bali-message-for-development-cooperation-in-the-pacific-the-indonesia-pacific-forum-for-development.

¹⁶ Aristyo Rizka Darmawan, “Why Indonesia’s Engagement with Pacific Countries Matters,” Lowy Institute, Interpreter, September 13, 2022 ~ <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/why-indonesia-s-engagement-pacific-countries-matters>.

¹⁷ A. Muh. Ibnu Aqil, “Indonesia, Pacific Nations Commit to Strengthening Ties,” *Jakarta Post*, December 7, 2022 ~ <https://www.thejakartapost.com/world/2022/12/07/indonesia-pacific-nations-commit-to-strengthening-ties.html>.

Over the past few years, Indonesia has also contributed to the strengthening of Indo-Pacific minilateral groupings. The Australia-India-Indonesia trilateral, with its focus on maritime issues and the Indian Ocean, has been elevated from the senior officials' level to a ministerial-level grouping. Meanwhile, the Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines Trilateral Maritime Patrol (Indomalphi), first launched in 2017, has contributed to a reduction of piracy incidents in the seas bordering the three countries, prompting the three defense ministers to speed up their expansion of the program.¹⁸ The Our Eyes intelligence-sharing initiative, launched in 2018 by Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand to combat terrorism and violent extremism, was expanded to become ASEAN Our Eyes. It appears that Indonesia is most comfortable when working on key Southeast Asian issues and also when it has a role in leading or shaping the arrangement.

This is the kind of dynamism and leadership in minilateralism and multilateralism that the Indo-Pacific needs from Indonesia, especially in shaping agendas that represent developing countries' needs and in leveraging its nonalignment in bringing decision-makers together. But while Indonesia's efforts favor economic, infrastructure, and maritime-linked partnerships and initiatives, they still reflect domestic imperatives more than support for building regional institutions. As domestic imperatives are driven in part by the current president's interests, this personality-driven approach is not conducive to a stable role for Indonesia in the Indo-Pacific unless Jokowi's successor shares his vision.

The Challenges Ahead

If Indonesia lacks a coherent strategy now, it will face even more challenges in realizing its vision in the future. Key among these is that ASEAN's ongoing efficacy as a preferred mechanism for Indonesia to execute its Indo-Pacific efforts is questionable. On the one hand, it is to Indonesia's advantage that many of the AOIP's traits, such as inclusivity and support for a rules-based system, dovetail with its own approach. In that regard, ASEAN should be a force multiplier for Indonesia's own efforts to bring Indo-Pacific countries closer together by increasing cooperation, especially in nonaligned forums. That said, with this approach, Indonesia's broader

¹⁸ Prashanth Parameswaran, "Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines Consider Expanding Sulu Sea Trilateral Patrols," *Diplomat*, April 19, 2022 ~ <https://thediplomat.com/2022/04/indonesia-malaysia-philippines-consider-expanding-sulu-sea-trilateral-patrols>.

Indo-Pacific efforts will only be as strong as ASEAN. And specifically, ASEAN centrality, a cornerstone of Indonesia's Indo-Pacific vision, is increasingly under threat from internal and external pressures.

Prime among ASEAN's internal pressures is the lack of progress on implementing the Five-Point Consensus on Myanmar, signed in April 2021, which calls for, among other things, an "immediate cessation of violence."¹⁹ More than twelve months later, the Five-Point Consensus had been clearly violated by all parties, especially the Myanmar Armed Forces. In reviewing the consensus at a summit in November 2022, ASEAN leaders admitted that "little progress" had been achieved but nonetheless called on the military to comply.²⁰ With no enforcement mechanisms, ASEAN appears utterly incapable of addressing an acute human security crisis within its own membership.

While it is not unusual to see differences among the ten member states, such as over the war in Ukraine,²¹ ASEAN's approach to the situation in Myanmar appears also to be splintering in unhelpful ways. Since February 2021, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines have been more strident in calling for an end to the Tatmadaw's intransigence but have not received support from Thailand or Cambodia. Although the November 2022 review encouraged ASEAN to explore "other approaches," Thailand's invitation to interested members of ASEAN to participate in a consultative meeting on Myanmar that December was seen to undermine Indonesia's leadership.²² The Myanmar issue exposes a critical weakness of ASEAN in which the Five-Point Consensus creates a facade of unity when, in a cynical reading of reality, the group is in fact deeply divided.

The issue of external pressures resulting from this situation is twofold. First, ASEAN's inability to address the human security crisis in Myanmar does not necessarily undermine its efficacy as the self-appointed builder of

¹⁹ The Five-Point Consensus is included as part of the 2021 Chairman's Statement. ASEAN Secretariat, "Chairman's Statement on the ASEAN Leaders' Meeting," April 24, 2021, 4 ~ <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/Chairmans-Statement-on-ALM-Five-Point-Consensus-24-April-2021-FINAL-a-1.pdf>.

²⁰ ASEAN Secretariat, "ASEAN Leaders' Review and Decision on the Implementation of the Five-Point Consensus," November 11, 2022 ~ https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/06-ASEAN-Leaders-Review-and-Decision-on-the-Implementation-of-the-Five-Point-Consensus_fin.pdf.

²¹ Thitinan Pongsudhirak, "Putin's War in Ukraine Has Deepened ASEAN Disunity," *Nikkei Asia*, April 5, 2022 ~ <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/Putin-s-war-in-Ukraine-has-deepened-ASEAN-disunity>.

²² Sharon Seah, "Relaying the ASEAN Baton from Cambodia to Indonesia," East Asia Forum, January 11, 2023 ~ <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2023/01/11/relaying-the-asean-baton-from-cambodia-to-indonesia/>; and Sebastian Strangio, "Thailand to Convene Regional Meeting on Myanmar Conflict," *Diplomat*, December 20, 2022 ~ <https://thediplomat.com/2022/12/thailand-to-convene-regional-meeting-on-myanmar-conflict>.

Indo-Pacific-wide architecture, but the crisis will—and should—consume much of its diplomatic efforts. On this front, ASEAN will take a reputational hit, potentially undercutting the Indo-Pacific region’s faith in its ability to build institutions required to manage the rapidly evolving strategic environment. With ASEAN preoccupied with internal affairs, non-ASEAN mechanisms could become even more attractive, relegating ASEAN to the backseat. Second and related is that if ASEAN is absorbed and weakened by dealing with intractable internal issues and cannot effectively manage U.S.-China rivalry, then its collective and individual state interests become collateral damage as great-power competition intensifies.

Why does this matter for Indonesia? If ASEAN remains the cornerstone of Indonesia’s foreign policy and ASEAN centrality a necessary feature of Indonesia’s Indo-Pacific vision, then Jakarta has no choice but to continually invest in the grouping’s survival.²³ As current chair of ASEAN, Indonesia faces two scenarios. In one, it doubles down on efforts to achieve progress in Myanmar amid raised international expectations that it will succeed as ASEAN’s *de facto* head. Within ASEAN, so far, Indonesia has modestly reinvented the special envoy role by creating an office of the special envoy with a dedicated team of staff. In addition to working within the grouping, Indonesia must use its ties with external partners to more actively involve them in resolving Myanmar’s crisis through supporting ASEAN’s efforts, such as by providing legal advice or resources to encourage “inclusive national dialogue.”²⁴ Indonesia can also encourage ASEAN external partners such as Australia, as Rebecca Barber has argued, to urge the United Nations to step up support for ASEAN-led mediation.²⁵ At the very least, success will look like preventing further backsliding and splintering of the grouping over the crisis.

The second scenario is that, in realizing the intractability of the Myanmar issue, Jakarta cuts its losses and diverts attention to pursue progress in other areas of its ASEAN chair agenda. This would be

²³ Retno L.P. Marsudi, “Pernyataan pers tahunan menteri luar negeri Republik Indonesia, Retno L.P. Marsudi” [Annual Press Statement of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, Retno L.P. Marsudi], Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Indonesia), January 10, 2017.

²⁴ “Commemorating 75th Anniversary of Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Foreign Minister Invites Countries to Strengthen Commitment to Human Rights,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Indonesia), Press Release, February 27, 2023 \approx <https://kemlu.go.id/portal/en/read/4493/berita/commemorating-75th-anniversary-of-universal-declaration-of-human-rights-foreign-minister-invites-countries-to-strengthen-commitment-to-human-rights>.

²⁵ Rebecca Barber, “Can ASEAN Forge a Political Solution in Myanmar?” Lowy Institute, Interpreter, March 22, 2023 \approx <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/can-asean-forge-political-solution-myanmar>. Shayna Bauchner and Andreas Harsono of Human Rights Watch also advocate bringing in Japan and South Korea to be part of a coalition of concerned governments. See Shayna Bauchner and Andreas Harsono, “Indonesia’s ASEAN leadership Tested with Myanmar,” Coconuts Jakarta, March 31, 2023 \approx <https://coconuts.co/jakarta/features/indonesias-asean-leadership-tested-with-myanmar>.

disappointing, but progress reports thus far on Indonesia’s “quiet diplomacy” on Myanmar are mixed.²⁶ If this were the case, Indonesia could turn its attention to strengthening ASEAN by developing an operational document to supplement the AOIP, akin to the ASEAN Community Blueprint.²⁷ As Richard Heydarian has argued, institutional decay within the group must be remedied.²⁸ Ensuring that ASEAN has a clear and unified idea of how to operationalize the AOIP is one way Indonesia can ensure the grouping remains functional and relevant. With the influx of states that have declared themselves Indo-Pacific players (including Canada, France, Germany, South Korea, and the United Kingdom, among others), an operational document would help ASEAN identify complementarities with these states and remain in the driver’s seat as the Indo-Pacific evolves.

Indonesia is also looking at strengthening ASEAN’s institutional capacity in several areas, including by bolstering the East Asia Summit through a document titled “EAS Plan of Action (2024–2028).”²⁹ The Quad’s expanding focus also provides opportunities for Indonesia to strengthen ASEAN. While the Quad could indeed challenge the East Asia Summit’s primacy as the top Indo-Pacific forum, as Hoang Thi Ha and Malcolm Cook caution, there is opportunity therein for Jakarta.³⁰ If it became more involved in Quad-Plus initiatives, Indonesia could shape the group’s agenda in ways complementary to the summit and that do not undermine it.

Another reason for Indonesia to maximize its achievements as ASEAN chair is that, as the country heads into an election year in 2024, President Jokowi will seek to shore up his domestic legacy. It makes sense that as chair Indonesia’s agenda for ASEAN—ergo, for the Indo-Pacific—will utilize diplomacy to focus on health architecture, energy security, food security, and financial stability, all of which also serve domestic interests. That said, it would not be surprising if the president turns away from broader

²⁶ “Indonesia Is Charting a New Course on Myanmar, but Is It Working?” *Frontier Myanmar*, March 22, 2023 ~ <https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/indonesia-is-charting-a-new-course-on-myanmar-but-is-it-working>.

²⁷ I Gusti Bagus Dharma Agastia, “Improving the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific,” *East Asia Forum*, July 28, 2022 ~ <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2022/07/28/improving-the-asean-outlook-on-the-indo-pacific>.

²⁸ Richard Javad Heydarian, “At a Strategic Crossroads: ASEAN Centrality amid Sino-American Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific,” *Brookings Institution*, April 2020, 5 ~ <https://www.brookings.edu/research/at-a-strategic-crossroads-asean-centrality-amid-sino-american-rivalry-in-the-indo-pacific>.


²⁹ M.I. Derry Aman, “Anchoring ASEAN Amidst Uncertainty: Indonesia’s Chairmanship Priorities,” *ASEANFocus* 40 (2023): 26–29 ~ <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/ASEANFocus-Mar-2023-1.pdf>.

³⁰ Hoang Thi Ha and Malcolm Cook, “Is the East Asia Summit Suffering Erosion?” *ISEAS Perspective* 2021, no. 61 (2021) ~ <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/is-the-east-asia-summit-suffering-erosion-by-hoang-thi-ha-and-malcolm-cook>.

Indo-Pacific matters later in 2023 to concentrate on domestic political matters. The project to move the capital from Jakarta to Nusantara, if achieved, for example, would be a prominent and tangible symbol of Jokowi's presidency. Because Jokowi cannot run for president again, questions loom about the attention that his successor will be able to devote to wider Indo-Pacific affairs during a time when a new administration is focused on establishing its domestic legitimacy.

Conclusion

Indonesia has a clear and principled vision for the Indo-Pacific that seeks to manage great- and rising-power competition, promote maritime affairs, and preserve a role for ASEAN. The country has had varying levels of success in realizing its wish to bring together states from around the Indian and Pacific Oceans, engaging in diplomacy with countries on both sides of its archipelago. However, these efforts are not coordinated by a strategy as much as by lofty values and domestic imperatives. As such, there is a risk that, particularly where Myanmar is concerned, the energy and attention needed to achieve progress will either wither or be diverted.

With an upcoming election in February 2024, Indonesia will have a new leader who might not share Jokowi's vision for the Indo-Pacific. Or, once settled, this president could have equal enthusiasm for shaping the regional order. It is also uncertain whether Retno will remain a constant as foreign minister; nonetheless, without a strategy, continuity between administrations will be difficult to achieve. As such, regional states should support and encourage Indonesia to do what it can in the final months of the Jokowi administration, as well as under the new president, and remind the country of its huge leadership potential as Southeast Asia's major nonaligned player. 

The Question from the Pacific Islands: Will the United States Be a Credible and Consistent Indo-Pacific Partner?

Henryk Szadziwski and Anna Powles

In March 2023, Dame Meg Taylor, lawyer, diplomat, and former secretary general of the Pacific Islands Forum, told Radio New Zealand that Pacific leaders “should have paid much more attention to the Indo-Pacific strategy as it emerged.”¹ Taylor’s comment highlighted not only the abundance of external strategies and policy frameworks targeting the Pacific Islands but also the increasing alignment of economic cooperation with security partnerships. Taylor was particularly concerned that island leaders were being sidelined while major geopolitical decisions were being made that affected the Pacific.

This tension was highlighted in the Pacific Islands Forum’s latest security outlook report, which noted that “while geopolitical competition could draw much-needed attention and resources to the Pacific, it could also distract the region and its partners from efforts to address its existing security priorities—addressing climate security, supporting human security, and disrupting criminal activity.”² These priorities are most cogently laid out in the 2018 Boe Declaration on Regional Security, which identified five key challenges in the Pacific: climate change, human security, environmental and resource security, transnational crime,

HENRYK SZADZIEWSKI is an Affiliate at the Center for Pacific Islands Studies at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa (United States). His research focuses on external state interventions in Oceania, emphasizing grounded responses to Chinese economic globalism. He has a PhD in Geography from the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa. He can be reached at <henryksz@hawaii.edu> or on Twitter <@henrykszad>.

ANNA POWLES is a Senior Lecturer at the Centre for Defence and Security Studies at Massey University (Aotearoa/New Zealand). Her research focuses on the interplay between local and external political and security actors in the Pacific, and her work has explored interventions in Pacific conflicts, security sector assistance, security cooperation and defense diplomacy, the Australia–New Zealand alliance, regional security architecture, and the nexus between local security dynamics and strategic competition in the Pacific. She is also a Nonresident Fellow with the National Bureau of Asian Research. She can be reached at <a.r.powles@massey.ac.nz> or on Twitter <@AnnaPowles>.

¹ Koroī Hawkins, “Pacific Needs to Sit Up and Pay Close Attention to AUKUS—Dame Meg Taylor,” Radio New Zealand, March 22, 2023 ~ <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/486490/pacific-needs-to-sit-up-and-pay-close-attention-to-aucus-dame-meg-taylor>.

² Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, “The Pacific Security Outlook Report 2022–2023,” 2022, 6 ~ <https://www.forumsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Pacific-Security-Outlook-Report-2022-2023.pdf>.

and cybersecurity.³ The heightened geostrategic environment of the Indo-Pacific—and the plethora of foreign strategies and policies aimed at the Pacific Islands—has been prompted by the increased political, security, economic, diplomatic, and cultural profile of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Australia, Canada, the European Union, India, Japan, South Korea, the United Kingdom, and the United States are among those states and regional bodies that have outlined security and economic plans for the wider Indo-Pacific region. Similarly, inside this large, two-ocean region, some of these actors, notably the United States and China, have focused new attention on the Pacific Islands. Through the United States’ Indo-Pacific Strategy and Pacific Partnership Strategy, both launched in 2022, Washington has clearly staked a claim in a competition for attaining—and retaining—influence in the Pacific Island countries and territories (PICTs).⁴

This essay examines the abovementioned U.S. strategies in the context of their implications for the PICTs. Before discussing the two strategies, however, the essay begins with a brief description of the United States’ post-Cold War Indo-Pacific and Pacific policies, which is critical to understand the measured PICT responses toward Washington’s recent “Pacific turn.” The next two sections then analyze the security and economic pledges of these strategies, evaluating the challenges and opportunities that the United States faces in Oceania. We argue that, while the United States has committed to re-engaging with the Pacific Islands and reasserting the U.S. strategic geography as part of the broader Pacific region, Washington’s persistent framing of the U.S. pivot to the Pacific in terms of strategic competition with China will undermine the United States’ ability to develop the type of deep relationships that will strengthen its role as a credible partner in the Pacific.

U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategies and Pacific Policies before 2022

The fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan in 1990 and 2003 diverted the United States from forming a comprehensive policy of strategic denial in the Pacific Ocean. Nevertheless, in the period between the end of the Cold War and 2022, the United States

³ Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, “Boe Declaration on Regional Security,” September 5, 2018 <https://www.forumsec.org/2018/09/05/boe-declaration-on-regional-security>.

⁴ White House, *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States* (Washington, D.C., February 2022) <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>; and White House, *Pacific Partnership Strategy of the United States* (Washington, D.C., September 2022) <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Pacific-Partnership-Strategy.pdf>.

developed policies of engagement with the PICTs. At a 1990 summit in Honolulu, for example, President George H.W. Bush announced a Joint Commercial Commission, which aimed to facilitate dialogue between Pacific Island governments and U.S. businesses exploring opportunities in the region.⁵ The commission later proved “to be a failure, with little new U.S. investment or trade in the islands.”⁶ In the decade following the commission, “influences from the USA, and other English-speaking nations...decreas[ed] as a proportion of the total external impact.”⁷ It then took another ten years, a period defined by the war on terrorism, for the United States to fully revert its gaze to the Pacific.

Building on earlier outreach efforts in 2010, U.S. president Barack Obama shifted attention from the Middle East to the Asia-Pacific region with his “Pacific pivot,” also known as the “rebalance to Asia.”⁸ The pivot acknowledged the growing importance of Asia and the Pacific to U.S. national interests, identifying the region as the “world’s political and economic center of gravity,” and was largely driven by the rise of China’s military and economic influence in the region.⁹ Then U.S. secretary of state Hillary Clinton argued that “the future of politics will be decided in Asia, not Afghanistan or Iraq, and the United States will be right at the center of the action.”¹⁰

Accordingly, the pivot aimed to strengthen U.S. statecraft in the Asia-Pacific through deepening and better integrating economic, security, and diplomatic ties and networks with key treaty allies (including Australia, Japan, the Philippines, and South Korea) and emerging partners (such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore). From the pivot, two key pillars emerged to bolster the United States’ defense and economic posture in the Asia-Pacific. The security pillar saw enhanced U.S. engagement in Asia—for example, the United States formally joined the East Asia Summit, affirmed that

⁵ George Bush, “Remarks at the Conclusion of the Pacific Island Nations–United States Summit in Honolulu, Hawaii,” American Presidency Project, October 27, 1990 ~ <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-conclusion-the-pacific-island-nations-united-states-summit-honolulu-hawaii>.

⁶ Nic Maclellan, “The Americans Are Coming,” *Inside Story*, April 15, 2021 ~ <https://insidestory.org.au/the-americans-are-coming>.

⁷ Ron Crocombe, *The Pacific Islands and the USA* (Suva: University of the South Pacific, 1995), 9.

⁸ Mark E. Manyin et al., “Pivot to the Pacific? The Obama Administration’s ‘Rebalancing’ toward Asia,” Congressional Research Service, CRS Report for Congress, R42448, March 28, 2012 ~ <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/natsec/R42448.pdf>.

⁹ “Advancing the Rebalance to Asia and the Pacific,” White House, Fact Sheet, November 16, 2015 ~ <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/11/16/fact-sheet-advancing-rebalance-asia-and-pacific>.

¹⁰ Hillary Clinton, “America’s Pacific Century,” *Foreign Policy*, October 11, 2011 ~ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century>.

freedom of navigation in the South China Sea was of vital national interest, and signed an agreement with Australia to allow rotational deployments of 2,500 U.S. Marines in Darwin. Under the economic pillar, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade agreement was signed in February 2016.

Although in 2017 the Trump administration withdrew from the TPP, upending the pivot's economic foundation, during his time in office President Donald Trump reinvigorated the United States' security presence in the Asia-Pacific. The declassified 2018 "U.S. Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific" skewed heavily toward defense and the threat of China to U.S. interests in the region.¹¹ This was no major surprise, as the framework emerged in the wake of the 2017 National Security Strategy and 2018 National Defense Strategy, both of which defined the Indo-Pacific as a key space in the military contest with China.¹² The shift in narrative was also evidenced by the increasing use of the term "Indo-Pacific" rather than "Asia-Pacific" to describe the region in terms of geography as well as strategic interests.

Yet encouraging trade was also a critical component in maintaining U.S. dominance in the Indo-Pacific, especially as China strengthened financial ties with the PICTs. In October 2019, the United States launched the "Pacific Pledge of the Indo-Pacific Strategy," which committed an additional \$100 million to the annual \$350 million in assistance to the PICTs to address climate change, connectivity and infrastructure development, maritime security, cybersecurity, and security cooperation.¹³ In October 2020, this amount was expanded to over \$200 million spread across three "Indo-Pacific pillars": economic (\$69 million), governance (\$4 million), and security (\$5 million), as well as \$130 million earmarked for the PICTs' Covid-19 recovery.¹⁴

¹¹ White House, "U.S. Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific," January 2021 ~ <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/IPS-Final-Declass.pdf>.

¹² White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States* (Washington, D.C., December 2017) ~ <https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/nss/NSS2017.pdf?ver=CnFwURrw09pJ0q5EogFpwg%3d%3d>; and U.S. Department of Defense, "Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America," 2018 ~ <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

¹³ "U.S. Engagement in the Pacific Islands: UN General Assembly Update," U.S. Department of State, Fact Sheet, October 3, 2019 ~ <https://2017-2021.state.gov/u-s-engagement-in-the-pacific-islands-un-general-assembly-update/index.html>.

¹⁴ "U.S. Engagement in the Pacific Islands: 2020 Pacific Pledge," U.S. Department of State, Fact Sheet, October 1, 2020 ~ <https://2017-2021.state.gov/u-s-engagement-in-the-pacific-islands-2020-pacific-pledge/index.html>.

The U.S. Indo-Pacific and Pacific Partnership Strategies of 2022

The United States' post-Cold War record of failed and underfunded policies in Oceania occurred at the same time that China was stepping up its own commitments to the PICTs. In the ten years between 2006 and 2016, the region received \$1.8 billion in Chinese aid, which is about the same as the cumulative amount that the region received from Beijing between 1950 and 2009.¹⁵ The value of trade with China increased from \$4.5 billion in 2012 to \$8.7 billion in 2018;¹⁶ similarly, foreign direct investment rose by a staggering 173% between just 2014 and 2016, with 70% of the \$2.8 billion investment directed to Papua New Guinea.¹⁷ In response to concerns about China's rising economic presence in the Pacific Islands, U.S. ally Australia launched its Pacific Step-up program in 2017, and U.S. strategic partner New Zealand followed shortly afterward with its Pacific Reset program in 2018. In February 2022, the Biden administration released its Indo-Pacific Strategy. The strategy has five main objectives: advance a free and open Indo-Pacific, build connections within and beyond the region, drive regional prosperity, bolster Indo-Pacific security, and build regional resilience to transnational threats.¹⁸

The U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy stresses the need to work with allies and partners to address the challenges and opportunities identified in achieving the five objectives. In June 2022, Australia, Japan, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States launched the Partners in the Blue Pacific (PBP) initiative. The group aims to coordinate their efforts to enhance Pacific regionalism, support the PICTs in line with the Pacific Islands Forum's 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent,¹⁹ and

¹⁵ Jonathan Pryke and Alexandre Dayant, "How to Improve Aid to Pacific Island Nations," Council of Councils, October 16, 2018 ~ <https://www.cfr.org/councilofcouncils/global-memos/how-improve-aid-pacific-island-nations>; and Denghua Zhang, Diego Leiva and Mélodie Ruwet, "Similar Patterns? Chinese Aid to Island Countries in the Pacific and the Caribbean," Australian National University, Department of Pacific Affairs, September 2019 ~ https://dpa.bellschool.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/2019-04/ib2019_9_zhang_chinese_aid_final.pdf.

¹⁶ Fang Ye et al., "The Relationship between China-South Pacific Island Countries Tourism and Trade in the Context of the Belt and Road Initiative," *Island Studies Journal* 15, no. 2 (2020): 73–92.

¹⁷ Ethan Meick, Michelle Ker, and Han May Chan, "China's Engagement in the Pacific Islands: Implications for the United States," U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, June 14, 2018 ~ <https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/China-Pacific%20Islands%20Staff%20Report.pdf>.

¹⁸ White House, *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*.

¹⁹ The Pacific Islands Forum is the region's premier political and economic policy organization, comprising eighteen members: Australia, Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, French Polynesia, Kiribati, Nauru, New Caledonia, New Zealand, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Republic of the Marshall Islands, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu.

develop opportunities for cooperation between the Pacific and the rest of the world.²⁰

Three months later, in late September, President Joe Biden hosted the historic, two-day U.S.–Pacific Island Country Summit in Washington, D.C., with the political leaders of fourteen Pacific Island countries. Following the summit, the leaders issued the Declaration on U.S.-Pacific Partnership, which outlined their shared goals and priorities on climate change mitigation, nuclear nonproliferation, maritime security, and post-pandemic economic recovery.²¹ On the meeting’s second day, the White House released the Pacific Partnership Strategy of the United States, which consists of four main objectives:

- create a strong U.S.–Pacific Islands partnership that elevates U.S. diplomatic engagement, economic aid, and security cooperation;
- support a united Pacific Islands region that is connected with the world (by endorsing the Pacific Islands Forum and other regional organizations);
- collaborate with Pacific Island nations to prepare for the climate crisis and other 21st-century challenges through providing financial aid, technical expertise, and capacity development; and
- foster economic opportunities and forge connectivity, such as collaborating on logistics, transportation, financial linkages, and technologies to enhance connectivity within the region and with the world.²²

Traditional and Nontraditional Security Implications

Washington’s strategic outlook is informed by the view that the Indo-Pacific region is “facing mounting challenges, particularly from the PRC...combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological might as it pursues a sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific and seeks to become the world’s most influential power.”²³ The Indo-Pacific Strategy argues that the “PRC’s coercion and aggression...is most acute in the

²⁰ “Statement by Australia, Japan, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States on the Establishment of the Partners in the Blue Pacific (PBP),” White House, June 24, 2022 ~ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/06/24/statement-by-australia-japan-new-zealand-the-united-kingdom-and-the-united-states-on-the-establishment-of-the-partners-in-the-blue-pacific-pbp>.

²¹ “Declaration on U.S.-Pacific Partnership,” White House, September 29, 2022 ~ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/09/29/declaration-on-u-s-pacific-partnership>.

²² White House, *Pacific Partnership Strategy of the United States*, 5–6.

²³ White House, *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*, 5.

Indo-Pacific”²⁴ and that, as a consequence of the region’s strategic value, a consistent U.S. role is a “strategic necessity.”²⁵ This outlook extends to the Pacific Islands, where Washington seeks to reorient—or pivot—the United States’ strategic geography, stating that the “United States is a proud Pacific power” and that “the history and the future of the Pacific Islands and the United States are inextricably linked.”²⁶

The approach to security engagement is informed by deterrence imperatives and steeped in values and vital interests. For the Pacific region, this is not without contradictions. The United States’ legacy in the Pacific includes the failure, until recently, to address unexploded ordnance from World War II and the long-term—and still unaddressed—health and social impacts of nuclear testing between 1947 and 1962. For citizens of the PICTs, this has led to a degree of skepticism about U.S. motivations for re-engaging with the Pacific.

Accordingly, the joint declaration and the Pacific Partnership Strategy are both anchored in U.S. ambitions for a peaceful, prosperous, and secure Pacific region. While both statements acknowledge nontraditional security issues, such as climate change, and seek to align with the regional security agenda and priorities that the Pacific Islands Forum laid out in its Boe Declaration, they also distill the United States’ approach to traditional security issues in the Pacific.

The declaration, which is a joint statement on shared commitments, places peace and security on the “Blue Pacific Continent” within the broader context of challenges to the international order.²⁷ The declaration makes direct reference to international law with respect to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, including freedom of navigation and overflight, upholding territorial integrity and sovereignty, and the condemnation of all wars of aggression, including Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. The Pacific Partnership Strategy mirrors these broader security concerns and makes a direct link between the United States’ own prosperity and security and the Pacific region “remaining free and open.”²⁸

²⁴ White House, *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*, 5.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁶ White House, *Pacific Partnership Strategy of the United States*, 16.

²⁷ The concept of the “Blue Pacific Continent” is that the Pacific Ocean is analogous to a continent that unites the Pacific Islands and their peoples for which they share collective responsibility and stewardship. The concept was adopted by the Pacific Islands Forum and is the basis of its *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent*. See Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent* (Suva, 2022) ≈ <https://www.forumsec.org/2050/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/PIFS-2050-Strategy-Blue-Pacific-Continent-WEB-5Aug2022-1-min-4.pdf>.

²⁸ White House, *Pacific Partnership Strategy of the United States*, 4.

The U.S. strategy interprets a reference in the Pacific Islands Forum’s *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent* to the impact of heightened geopolitical competition on member countries²⁹ as including “pressure and economic coercion by the People’s Republic of China, which risks undermining the peace, prosperity, and security of the region, and by extension, of the United States.”³⁰ Pacific leaders have consistently argued that “long-standing security threats emanating from ongoing geopolitical and geostrategic positioning by major powers in the region are impacting regional politics and security considerations.”³¹ However, Pacific leaders have frequently called for cooperation rather than competition between China and the United States and its partners. The majority of the PICTs have adopted balancing and hedging strategies to navigate between Beijing and Washington.

Both the declaration and Pacific Partnership strategy are nested in the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy, which states that the United States “will seek to be an indispensable partner to the Pacific Islands.”³² Key drivers of this engagement are to reinforce deterrence through the promotion of regional security and to build the defense capacity of partners in the PICTs, with specific reference to maritime security. This includes expanding the U.S. Coast Guard presence and cooperation activities in the islands—with a focus on advising, training, deployment, and capacity building—as well as improving maritime domain awareness.

Maritime security is a central theme throughout the declaration, the Pacific Partnership Strategy, and the Indo-Pacific Strategy, and it will likely be a cornerstone of U.S. security engagement and activities in the Pacific. The declaration states that “Together we will strengthen our cooperation on maritime security, maritime conservation, and the sustainable use of the Pacific Ocean based on the rule of law.”³³ The Pacific Partnership Strategy, drawing from the reference to the Maritime Security Initiative in the Indo-Pacific Strategy,³⁴ also commits the United States to building maritime domain awareness capacity to ensure the PICTs are able to monitor their maritime domains, including fisheries and protected areas. Combating illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing is a key entry point

²⁹ Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, *The 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent*.

³⁰ White House, *Pacific Partnership Strategy of the United States*, 4.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, 13.

³³ “Declaration on U.S.-Pacific Partnership.”

³⁴ White House, *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*, 15.

with respect to strategic competition and building regional deterrence. The Oceania Maritime Security Initiative, which saw joint U.S. Navy and U.S. Coast Guard patrols in the western Pacific in early 2023, aims to support the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission Convention and conduct operations countering transnational crime.

Building on this, the Pacific Partnership Strategy cites the Quad's Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA), detailed in the Indo-Pacific Strategy, as an essential mechanism for increasing Pacific Island capacity to exercise sovereign rights to secure offshore resources, combat IUU fishing and drug trafficking, and address other maritime security matters. The mechanism aims to provide a "near-real-time, integrated, and cost-effective maritime domain awareness picture."³⁵ Notably, the IPMDA is the first time that the United States has included nations in the Pacific Islands, Southeast Asia, and the Indian Ocean region in a single framework.³⁶ Moreover, as mentioned above, it could be argued that the United States sees taking efforts to address IUU fishing and other maritime transnational crimes in the Pacific as an entry point to also counter strategic competition. China is a leading culprit of IUU fishing in the Pacific and an obstacle to its redress—in March 2023, for example, Beijing blocked the South Pacific Regional Fisheries Management Organization from placing two Chinese fishing vessels on the organization's IUU fishing blacklist.³⁷ Expanding U.S. and partner maritime domain awareness capabilities in the Pacific will give the United States greater visibility of Chinese activities, as well as address an issue of major significance to the PICTs.

Despite these plans for cooperation, questions remain on how maritime security mechanisms such as the IPMDA will be incorporated into the existing maritime architecture among the PICTs. It is unclear, for instance, how the IPMDA will integrate with the Regional Fisheries Surveillance Centre managed by the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency. It is also unclear how the proposed U.S. maritime security activities will actually build capacity and capability across the region's island states, as well as

³⁵ "Quad Leaders' Tokyo Summit 2022," White House, Fact Sheet, May 23, 2022 ~ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/05/23/fact-sheet-quad-leaders-tokyo-summit-2022>.

³⁶ Jasmin Alsaied, "How to Make the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness Work," *Diplomat*, October 11, 2022 ~ <https://thediplomat.com/2022/10/how-to-make-the-indo-pacific-partnership-for-maritime-domain-awareness-work>.

³⁷ Cliff White, "China Blocks SPRFMO from Placing Two of Its Vessels on IUU Blacklist," *Seafood Source*, March 6, 2023 ~ <https://www.seafoodsource.com/news/premium/environment-sustainability/china-blocks-sprfmo-from-placing-two-of-its-vessels-on-iuu-blacklist>.

close critical gaps between maritime surveillance, interdiction at sea, and prosecutions. To that end, U.S. maritime security engagement in the Pacific is a prescient example of the growing challenges of providing security sector assistance in the region. As the next section highlights, Washington has conflated its security concerns with its economic engagement in the Pacific.


Economic Implications

Of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy's five objectives, the third is to "drive regional prosperity," in particular through leading an Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF).³⁸ In May 2022, the United States along with thirteen regional partners—including Fiji, the sole Pacific Islands member—launched the IPEF,³⁹ succinctly outlining its aims as connected, resilient, clean, and fair economies. Many of the region's larger and middle powers, such as Australia, India, Indonesia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea, were part of the group, but China was not included.

However, the Indo-Pacific Strategy falls short overall on a substantive regional economic framework—what it and the IPEF outline has little relevance to Pacific Island economies. In addition, the strategy's focus on boosting alliances and militaries to contain Beijing is neither of the PICTs' making nor in their interest, especially given their growing volume of aid to, trade with, and investment in China. In other words, from the perspective of the Pacific Islanders, the tone of enhancing multilateralism throughout the Indo-Pacific Strategy is a positive step; however, the emphasis on security is misplaced. The climate crisis and sustainable livelihoods are at the core of Pacific Islander priorities, not U.S. competition with China.

Furthermore, questions remain over the effectiveness of the IPEF, particularly in comparison with other regional economic groupings and policies. The IPEF is not a trade agreement and, as such, its failure to expand access to the U.S. market is a considerable disincentive for would-be partners. Therefore, engagement with regional allies and partners on trade agreements would engender more favorable views of Washington's traditional security goals. Remaining outside TPP's successor, the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), for instance, is an example of how the United States fails to meet

³⁸ White House, *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*, 15.

³⁹ "Marking One Year since the Release of the Administration's Indo-Pacific Strategy," U.S. Department of State, Fact Sheet, February 13, 2013  <https://www.state.gov/marking-one-year-since-the-release-of-the-administrations-indo-pacific-strategy>.

its partners' interests. By contrast, China applied to join the CPTPP in September 2021 and is already a member of another significant regional trading bloc, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership. The lack of U.S. participation in trade agreements, combined with the fuzziness of the Biden administration's big-picture economic policies, such as IPEF and Build Back Better World (a presumed competitor to China's Belt and Road Initiative), does not add up to a significant U.S. economic intervention in the Indo-Pacific.

The Indo-Pacific Strategy's corollary of greater relevance to Oceania, the Pacific Partnership Strategy, includes "empowered and prosperous Pacific Islanders" as one of its objectives, clearly stemming from the line of effort to "create economic opportunities and forge connectivity."⁴⁰ At the launch of the Pacific Partnership Strategy, Washington pledged \$810 million to the region, of which \$600 million is for fisheries and the remainder for infrastructure and climate-resilience financing.⁴¹

This multimillion-dollar commitment should be met with some skepticism. In a September 2022 fact sheet, the U.S. Department of State outlined existing economic promises to the Pacific Islands under the Indo-Pacific Strategy, which included requesting \$60 million a year from Congress for ten years to fund support for the South Pacific Tuna Treaty, a measure designed to limit the expansion of Chinese fishing in the Pacific Ocean.⁴² Vice President Kamala Harris had already announced the funding during her July 2022 address to the Pacific Islands Forum leaders' meeting. In effect, the United States took credit twice for the same pledge.

Congressional approval for funding also leaves this plan for the PICTs vulnerable to the whims of the Congress in power to meet the economic promises of the Pacific Partnership Strategy. Given the partisan environment in Washington, the struggle over funding Biden's domestic Build Back Better infrastructure plan, and electoral turnovers affecting Congress and presidential administrations, this funding may not be easy to sustain over the long term. Similar caveats exist for funding pledges made during negotiations and renewals of the Compacts of Free Association with the Marshall Islands, Micronesia, and Palau. The Biden administration has

⁴⁰ White House, *Pacific Partnership Strategy of the United States*, 7.

⁴¹ "Roadmap for a 21st-Century U.S.-Pacific Island Partnership," White House, Fact Sheet, September 29, 2022 ~ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/09/29/fact-sheet-roadmap-for-a-21st-century-u-s-pacific-island-partnership>.

⁴² "U.S. Engagement in the Pacific Islands: 2022 Pacific Islands Conference of Leaders," U.S. Department of State, September 13, 2022 ~ <https://www.state.gov/u-s-engagement-in-the-pacific-islands-2022-pacific-islands-conference-of-leaders>.

earmarked \$7.1 billion for these agreements, but their renewal and funding are conditioned on congressional approval.

By 2022, two-way trade between the United States and the Pacific Islands stood at \$832 million per year, making competition with China on trade a long-term endeavor.⁴³ At the 2022 U.S.–Pacific Island Country Summit, Deputy United States Trade Representative Sarah Bianchi announced the establishment of a trade and investment dialogue with the islands to promote trade and address market barriers.⁴⁴ The first of such dialogues was held virtually in February 2023.⁴⁵ Yet grounded and practical initiatives on entrepreneurship that impact Pacific Islanders’ lives may provide more goodwill to the United States in the region. The Pacific Islands Strategic Framework 2022–2027 developed by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) is such a measure—it includes an objective to support micro-, small-, and medium-sized private enterprise by targeting the development of e-commerce. Nevertheless, the language of rivalry with China is never far away. In May 2023, Michael Schiffer, USAID assistant administrator for Asia, testified to Congress that the agency’s 2024 budget request included a focus on private-sector productivity and digital connectivity as well as on assisting partners to “resist coercive, unfair, and/or corrupt PRC trade practices...and [increase] diversification away from PRC state-owned enterprises.”⁴⁶

The United States faces multiple challenges and opportunities in implementing its Indo-Pacific and Pacific Partnership strategies in ways that have a positive impact for Pacific Islanders. PICT leaders have welcomed renewed U.S. engagement in the region, as there are shared political values, religious beliefs, languages, and popular culture between the islands and the United States that have been established since colonization. The greatest risk is that this re-engagement becomes conditioned on denying China access

⁴³ Satu Limaye et al., “The Pacific Islands Matter for America/America Matters for the Pacific Islands,” East-West Center, March 8, 2022 \approx <https://www.eastwestcenter.org/publications/the-pacific-islands-matter-americaamerica-matters-the-pacific-islands>.

⁴⁴ “United States Announces Enhanced Engagement with the Pacific Islands,” Office of the U.S. Trade Representative, Press Release, September 29, 2022 \approx <https://ustr.gov/about-us/policy-offices/press-office/press-releases/2022/september/united-states-announces-enhanced-engagement-pacific-islands-0>.

⁴⁵ “Fresh Horizons with New US-Pacific Trade and Investment Dialogue,” Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, Press Release, February 28, 2023 \approx <https://www.forumsec.org/2023/02/28/release-fresh-horizons-with-new-us-pacific-trade-and-investment-dialogue>.

⁴⁶ Michael Schiffer, “FY 2024 Budget Request for East Asia and the Pacific,” written testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on East Asia, the Pacific, and International Cybersecurity Policy, Washington, D.C., May 2, 2023 \approx https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/1e44f443-b41b-1297-2952-a3e7ab354729/050223_Schiffer_Testimony.pdf.

to Oceania. The danger of such an approach is that it can lead to the type of stopgap policies that have long plagued U.S. foreign policy toward the PICTs. Congress has an important role to play in meeting U.S. commitments on funding. Overpromising once again and failing to deliver would serve neither the security nor economic objectives of the Indo-Pacific and Pacific Partnership strategies.

Conclusion

U.S. engagement with the Pacific is driven in part by Washington's ambitions to "shape the strategic environment in which it [China] operates, building a balance of influence that is favorable to the United States, our allies and partners, and the interests and values we share."⁴⁷ The U.S. Declaration of Partnership and Pacific Partnership Strategy, both nested in the Indo-Pacific Strategy, seek to provide a framework for how the United States will achieve these ambitions through aiming to address the priorities of Oceania itself. There are, however, inconsistencies and tensions inherent within this approach. Washington's ability to maintain a coherent regional policy that prioritizes Pacific interests in the face of heightened geopolitical competition will become increasingly challenged by both the politics in Washington and the ability of the United States to balance its broader strategic interests with Pacific priorities.⁴⁸ The window of opportunity for the United States to demonstrate to its Pacific partners that it is a credible and consistent actor is not indefinite. ◆

⁴⁷ Daniel J. Kritenbrink, "FY 2024 Budget Request for East Asia and the Pacific," testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on East Asia, the Pacific, and International Cybersecurity Policy, May 2, 2023 ~ https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/1e44f443-b41b-1297-2952-a3e7ab354729/050223_Kritenbrink_Testimony.pdf.

⁴⁸ Joanne Wallis and Anna Powles, "Smooth Sailing? How Australia, New Zealand and the United States Partner in—and with—the Pacific Islands," Australian Strategic Policy Institute, Special Report, May 2023 ~ <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/smooth-sailing>.

France in the Indo-Pacific: From a Balancing Power to a Constructive Stakeholder

Céline Pajon

France was the first European country to announce an Indo-Pacific strategy, launching it in 2018.¹ France is a resident power in the region. It maintains territories in both the Indian Ocean (the islands of Mayotte and Réunion, the Scattered Islands, and the French Southern and Antarctic Territories) and the Pacific Ocean (New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna, French Polynesia, and Clipperton Island), with 1.5 million citizens living in these territories and in other regional countries, and more than 90% of its large exclusive economic zone (9 million square kilometers) located in the two oceans. To take care of this vast area, France maintains a military presence of 8,000 personnel in the region. Its original position derives from the country's sovereign interests in the Indo-Pacific and aims to propose a way out of the U.S.-China rivalry through an inclusive and multilateral approach to regional affairs that also maintains the rules-based order.

Since 2021, the French approach of “strategic autonomy” has been challenged by several developments, specifically by the AUKUS defense pact between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States but also more broadly by growing Chinese assertiveness, the ideological turn of the Sino-U.S. rivalry, and the implications of the war in Ukraine. However, as geopolitical polarization grows and international security worsens, the feasibility and sustainability of an Indo-Pacific strategy in which France acts as a “balancing power”—a *puissance d'équilibre(s)*—are seriously called into question. There is indeed a significant gap between the political rhetoric of French priority and ambition for the Indo-Pacific and the reality of the resources it has committed to the region. Against this background,

CÉLINE PAJON is Head of Japan Research at the Center for Asian Studies at the Institut français des relations internationales (Ifri) in Paris (France), where she has been a research fellow since 2008. She researches Japanese foreign and defense policy as well as France's and Europe's Indo-Pacific strategies and coordinates Ifri's program on the Pacific Islands. In addition, she is a Senior Researcher with the Japan Chair at Vrije Universiteit Brussels and an International Research Fellow with the Canon Institute for Global Studies in Tokyo. She can be reached at <pajon@ifri.org> or on Twitter <@CelinePajon>.

¹ Emmanuel Macron, “Discours à Garden Island, base navale de Sydney” [Speech at Garden Island Naval Base], Elysée, May 3, 2018 \approx <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2018/05/03/discours-a-garden-island-base-navale-de-sydney>. For the most updated and comprehensive document at the time this essay was written, see Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs (France), *France's Indo-Pacific Strategy* (Paris, 2022) \approx https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/en_dcp_a4_indopacifique_022022_v1-4_web_cle878143.pdf.

this essay argues that France should recalibrate its Indo-Pacific posture away from being a balancing power and toward that of a pragmatic and constructive regional stakeholder.

This essay begins by examining the motivations for France's Indo-Pacific Strategy, which include both protecting French interests in the face of Chinese expansion and the Sino-U.S. rivalry and, under Emmanuel Macron's leadership, restoring France's global influence and status in the future world order. The following section looks at this strategy itself and what it includes. The essay next addresses the challenges France's strategy faces in a worsening geopolitical context. It then makes the argument that Paris should adopt a more modest and realistic stakeholder posture in the Indo-Pacific, before drawing together some concluding points.

Why Devise a Strategy? France's High Stakes in the Indo-Pacific

Protecting French interests in the face of challenges from China. In the past decade, several developments in the Indo-Pacific region have been closely monitored and served as a catalyst to prompt France to define its strategic vision. In particular, China's advance in the South China Sea and the risks this poses to the freedom of navigation and the peaceful resolution of disputed areas have been one important element; a second has been the development of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) since 2013 across the Indian Ocean, Central Asia, and Europe.² The opening of a large Chinese military base in Djibouti in 2017 was a wake-up call, and the implications of China's BRI convinced France's foreign affairs and economic ministries of the need to better define the national interest and strategy vis-à-vis China, including in the Indo-Pacific.³

The 2017 Defense and National Security Strategic Review already clearly acknowledged the risks of China's rise in terms of strategic ambition, noting China's desire to "become the dominant power in Asia" and "match or overtake the power of the United States."⁴ It also recognized that China's

² Hugo Meijer, "Pulled East. The Rise of China, Europe and French Security Policy in the Asia-Pacific," *Journal of Strategic Studies* (2021) ~ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01402390.2021.1935251>.

³ Alice Ekman et al., *La France face aux nouvelles routes de la soie Chinoise* [France Faced with the New Chinese Silk Roads] (Paris: Institut français des relations internationales [Ifri], 2018) ~ https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/ekman_ifri_france_routes_soie_2018.pdf; and "Les nouvelles routes de la soie" [The New Silk Roads], Ministry of the Economy and Finance (France), Trésor-éco, no. 229, October 2018 ~ <https://www.tresor.economie.gouv.fr/Articles/1f64b246-7e41-4284-8de5-b079aecb5b7e/files/7fb43132-5583-4e63-917a-8e2a505c909a>.

⁴ Republic of France, *2017 Defense and National Security Strategic Review* (Paris, October 2017), 42 ~ https://franceintheus.org/IMG/pdf/defense_and_national_security_strategic_review_2017.pdf.

military budget was now “more than four times higher than that of France,” and that some of China’s behaviors challenged the rules-based international order.⁵ The National Strategic Review of November 2022 clarifies the vision of China as a systemic rival and notes with concern the growing strategic convergence between Beijing and Moscow.⁶ President Macron has repeatedly underlined, especially during his visits to France’s overseas territories in the region, the risks of Chinese hegemony, China’s predatory moves, and the need for Paris to develop its own approach toward the Indo-Pacific and act as a credible power there.⁷ France’s Indo-Pacific Strategy is thus clearly informed by taking a balancing and hedging approach vis-à-vis China.

For France, contributing to Indo-Pacific stability and upholding a rules-based international order are critical not only to protect French sovereign interests in the area but also to maintain key economic and political partners in the region. As such, Paris has reassessed the importance of the Indo-Pacific and found it crucial for the coming world order.

Restoring France’s global influence and acting as a balancing power. Since 2017, Macron has made clear that he wants to restore both France’s global influence by upholding French values and principles and Paris’s role as a central player in the workings of global governance and multilateralism.⁸ The 2022 National Strategic Review confirmed this approach. In his opening letter to the review, Macron wrote: “By 2030, I want France to have consolidated its role as a balancing, united, globally influential power, a driving force for European autonomy.”⁹ The Macron

⁵ Republic of France, *2017 Defense and National Security Strategic Review*, 42.

⁶ Secrétariat général de la défense et de la sécurité nationale (France), *The National Strategic Review* (Paris, November 2022) \approx http://www.sgdsn.gouv.fr/communiqués_presse/revue-nationale-strategique-2022.

⁷ “In this region of the globe, China is building its hegemony step by step... We should work with China...to intensify exchanges and seize all the opportunities, but if we don’t organize ourselves, it will soon be a hegemony that will reduce our freedoms, our opportunities, and that we will have to endure” (author’s translation). Emmanuel Macron, “Discours du Président de la République Emmanuel Macron sur la Nouvelle-Calédonie à Nouméa” [Speech of the President of the Republic Emmanuel Macron on New Caledonia to Noumea], Élysée, May 5, 2018 \approx <https://www.elysee.fr/front/pdf/elysee-module-2070-fr.pdf>. Referring to China without naming it, President Macron in Papeete stated: “But I tell you very clearly, in the times that are opening up, woe to the little ones, woe to the isolated, woe to those who will have to endure influence and incursions of hegemony that will come to seek their fish, their technologies, their economic resources” (author’s translation). Emmanuel Macron, “Discours du Président de la République à Papeete, Tahiti” [Speech of the President of the Republic Emmanuel Macron to Papeete, Tahiti], Élysée, July 28, 2021 \approx <https://www.elysee.fr/front/pdf/elysee-module-18162-fr.pdf>.

⁸ Emmanuel Macron, “Discours du Président de la République à l’ouverture de la conférence des ambassadeurs” [Speech by the President of the Republic at the Opening of the Conference of Ambassadors], Élysée, August 29, 2017 \approx <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2017/08/29/discours-du-president-de-la-republique-a-l-ouverture-de-la-conference-des-ambassadeurs>.

⁹ Secrétariat général de la défense et de la sécurité nationale (France), *The National Strategic Review*.

Doctrine is rightly based on a sense of deep crisis in the world order and multilateral framework of 1945, and it is fueled by the desire to “prevent the Chinese-American duopoly, the dislocation, the return of hostile regional powers.”¹⁰

President Macron’s ambition is to ensure that France and Europe will remain relevant in the coming world order shaped by the Sino-U.S. rivalry. He argues that France should be a balancing power—a *puissance d’équilibre(s)*—not aligned with the United States but acting autonomously and offering an alternative way out of the bipolar confrontation, seen as a destabilizing factor.¹¹ Considering the role of China in the genesis of the French Indo-Pacific Strategy, this advocated-for balancing approach has sent some confusing messages about France’s ambitions and functions in the region.

What Strategy? A Principled, Independent, Inclusive, and Partnership-Based Approach

Upholding the rules-based order. At the core of France’s principles-based approach to the Indo-Pacific are freedom of circulation and respect for international law, especially at sea.¹² Freedom of navigation stands out as a key concern—any disruption of the vital maritime routes that cross the region would indeed be dramatic for European economic and trade security.

Accordingly, France supports the strict application of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), contributes to actions against crime at sea, and is keen to actively demonstrate its commitment to the freedom of navigation. In 2016, at the Shangri-La Dialogue, then minister of defense Jean-Yves Le Drian emphasized the need to discourage unilateral *coups de force* in the South and East China Seas for fear that similar actions might occur in other areas like the Mediterranean Sea.¹³ Thus, while not taking sides on sovereignty matters, Paris has consistently sent its ships to the South and East China Seas in recent years with the sailings of the Jeanne d’Arc naval mission and surveillance frigates based in New Caledonia.

¹⁰ Emmanuel Macron et al., “The Macron Doctrine,” Groupe d’études géopolitiques, November 16, 2020 ≈ <https://geopolitique.eu/en/2020/11/16/the-macron-doctrine>.

¹¹ Macron, “Discours du Président de la République à la conférence des ambassadeurs.”

¹² Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs (France), *France’s Indo-Pacific Strategy*, 3.

¹³ Jean-Yves Le Drian, “Statement for the Fourth Plenary Session: The Challenges of Conflict Resolution, 15th Asia Security Summit” (Shangri-La Dialogue, Singapore, June 5, 2016) ≈ <https://www.iiss.org/events/shangri-la-dialogue/shangri-la-dialogue-2016>.

In June 2019, the aircraft carrier *Charles de Gaulle* was dispatched to Singapore, and the French defense minister reiterated that Paris will continue upholding international law in a “steady, nonconfrontational but obstinate way.”¹⁴

The “values” dimension of the French Indo-Pacific approach should be understood broadly as promoting international law and emphasizing a democratic process at the interstate level (in the form of a new multilateralism). This approach is inclusive and aims at federating the maximum number of like-minded partners when cooperating on international issues.

A partnership-based approach. As its capacity to mobilize in the Indo-Pacific region is limited, France expects to rely on its strategic partners by promoting flexible formats for cooperation. Its Indo-Pacific Strategy is thus based on close partnerships with like-minded countries that are also active in the region and strives to build up a network through minilateral and ad hoc groupings that will mutualize capacity and effect greater impact. Partners include India, Japan, the United States, Australia (though to a lesser extent after AUKUS), Indonesia, and Singapore, among others.

France’s key partnerships are founded not only on common values and interests but also more concretely on defense deals and practical security cooperation aimed at sharing key information and reinforcing interoperability and coordination at sea, including cross-deck, replenishment at sea, minesweeping, and antisubmarine warfare operations. These partnerships support French vessels in their patrolling and deployment in the vast Indo-Pacific waters as well as France’s efforts to monitor its territories. Trilateral discussions are now developing out of parallel bilateral partnerships, and while France is still reluctant to formally join the Quad, it held its La Pérouse joint naval exercises with the four Quad partners (Australia, India, Japan, and the United States) for the first time in April 2021 and then again in March 2023, demonstrating its convening power and naval capacity.¹⁵

¹⁴ “Discours de Florence Parly, ministre des armées, allocution au Shangri-La Dialogue” [Speech by Florence Parly, Minister for the Armed Forces, at the Shangri-La Dialogue], Ministère des Armées (France), June 1, 2019 \approx https://www.defense.gouv.fr/salle-de-presse/discours/discours-de-florence-parly/discours-de-florence-parly-ministre-des-armees_allocution-au-shangri-la-dialogue.

¹⁵ Xavier Vavasseur, “Australia, France, India, Japan, and the United States Take Part in Exercise La Pérouse,” *Naval News*, April 6, 2021; and “Mission Jeanne d’Arc 23—Exercice Laperouse pour la sécurité maritime de la zone Indopacifique” [Mission Jeanne d’Arc 23—Laperouse Exercise for Maritime Security in the Indo-Pacific Zone], Ministère des Armées (France), Press Release, March 15, 2023 \approx <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/operations/actualites/mission-jeanne-darc-23-exercice-laperouse-securite-maritime-zone-indopacifique>.

In addition, France has set deepening its relations with the members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as a priority. It aims to “build up the strategic autonomy” of its Southeast Asian partners—also actively courted by China and the United States—including through the provision of defense equipment and training, as well as with development assistance on environmental issues and health.¹⁶

Finally, the Macron government has strongly pushed the European Union to adopt its own Indo-Pacific approach, which was announced on September 16, 2021.¹⁷ France is eager to coordinate at the EU level in the Indo-Pacific because a European approach works both in synergy (particularly on maritime security) and as a complement to the French strategy.¹⁸ Indeed, the EU has significant capabilities to support sustainable development, infrastructure plans, and capacity building through its Global Gateway Initiative, which was initiated in 2021.¹⁹ As a trade superpower, the EU has great leverage in this domain, and Brussels is also looking for Europe to become a strategic player on critical technologies. Working at the EU level will allow France to promote a more holistic strategy in the region.

Strategic autonomy in a multipolar, inclusive Indo-Pacific. France is pursuing its own path in the Indo-Pacific. Paris is uncomfortable with Washington’s Indo-Pacific policy developed under the Trump administration, which is Sino-centric, military-based, and confrontational. Instead, it is promoting an independent and inclusive regional strategy that reflects a slightly different vision of what a stable, rules-based order should look like. Rather than upholding continued U.S. dominance, France supports a multipolar environment that would allow it to pursue its own approach while also checking China’s influence in the

¹⁶ See Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs (France), “France’s Partnerships in the Indo-Pacific,” April 2021, 8–9 ~ https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/en_a4_indopacifique_16p_2021_v4_cle4b8b46.pdf.

¹⁷ European Commission and the EU High Representative, “Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council: The EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific,” September 16, 2021 ~ https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication_2021_24_1_en.pdf.

¹⁸ At the EU ministerial forum on the Indo-Pacific held in Paris on February 22, 2022, it was announced that an EU-coordinated maritime presence will soon be established for the first time in the Indo-Pacific, precisely in the northwestern Indian Ocean.

¹⁹ Between 2021 and 2027, “Team Europe,” meaning the EU institutions and member states jointly, will mobilize up to 300 billion euros in investments for this initiative. See European Commission and the EU High Representative, “Global Gateway” ~ https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/stronger-europe-world/global-gateway_en.

region. At the same time, France wants to maintain a robust dialogue and partnership with China.²⁰

Paris considers the U.S.-China rivalry (in addition to China's own assertive moves) to be a disruptive factor and aims to mitigate the negative side effect of the polarization by fostering a multipolar and multilateral region governed by the rule of law.²¹ Jean-Yves Le Drian put it aptly when he served as minister for Europe and foreign affairs: "Beyond any logic of blocks, we therefore intend to champion a third path in the Indo-Pacific for responding to today's upheavals with all well-intentioned powers."²²

This strategic autonomy, or the ambition to promote a third way and act as a balancing power, explains why France, while maintaining close and dynamic strategic partnerships with the four members of the Quad, has so far refused to be politically associated with the grouping. Not only is the Quad perceived by some as an anti-China coalition, but Paris prefers to keep its options open and promote its own initiatives.

The Problems with the Strategy

France's equilibrium approach is not without challenges. Recent developments highlight the inconsistency of France's specific stance and the fault line between political rhetoric and the operational level of French engagement in the region.²³

Strategic autonomy in an adverse environment. As the security environment in the Indo-Pacific has deteriorated in recent years, France's equilibrium approach has shown limitations. The increasingly authoritarian nature of Xi Jinping's regime, revelations about human rights violations in Xinjiang, Beijing's handling of the Covid-19 pandemic, the crackdown on democracy in Hong Kong, and the repeated frictions in the Taiwan Strait

²⁰ See "China—Joint Statement by the French Republic and the People's Republic of China," French Embassy in the United Kingdom, April 7, 2023 \approx <https://uk.ambafrance.org/President-Macron-pays-State-visit-to-China>.

²¹ Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs (France), *France's Indo-Pacific Strategy*, 10. France is part of the Indian Ocean Commission, the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium, the West Pacific Naval Symposium, the Indian Ocean Rim Association, the South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting, and the Heads of Asian Coast Guard Agencies Meeting; is a dialogue partner of the Pacific Islands Forum; and is a development partner of ASEAN. France is applying for observer status in the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus).

²² Jean-Yves Le Drian, "Foreword," in Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs (France), "France's Partnerships in the Indo-Pacific," 2–3.

²³ See also Jérémy Bachelier and Céline Pajon, "France and AUKUS: Bouncing Back to Live Up to Pacific Challenges," Ifri, November 3, 2022 \approx <https://www.ifri.org/en/publications/briefings-de-lifri/france-and-aukus-bouncing-back-live-pacific-challenges>.

and the South China Sea have deteriorated China's image abroad and fueled an arms race in the region.

These events triggered, in part, Australia's decision to terminate its submarine contract with France and instead to seal a defense partnership with the United Kingdom and the United States that involves developing nuclear-powered submarines. The AUKUS pact, announced in September 2021 without any prior notice to the French government, led to a crisis of confidence in France's relations with three of its key partners and shed light on their differences regarding the best way to salvage the international order and address the China challenge.

The AUKUS deal also called into question France's strategic positioning in the Indo-Pacific and the risk of being sidelined. In addition, by disapproving of France's "Europeanization" of the AUKUS crisis,²⁴ some European reactions showed the reluctance of France's European partners to align with an Indo-Pacific approach that favors strategic autonomy at the expense of their relationship with Washington. The war in Ukraine has only deepened Europe's resolve to prioritize its relationship with the United States and its desire for a lasting U.S. security commitment in the region.

Unclear strategic posture. France's rhetoric about a strategic posture—known alternatively as the "third way," "strategic autonomy," or "balancing power"—is neither well-articulated nor well-understood by its partners. Therefore, this posture causes confusion among France's allies and leads to the constant need for France to explain and justify its stance. Some partners understand France's position as an equidistance posture, which it is not. Others interpret it as a sign of wavering commitment to the region. And some, like Japan, are concerned that such a posture might complicate coordination with the United States.

In this regard, the French approach seems to be more detrimental than beneficial in terms of building cooperation and influence.²⁵ Indeed, France's position is not original, as most Indo-Pacific countries are hedging between Washington and Beijing, prioritizing their own interests, and wishing to maintain an overall stable international environment. So while this posture might be appreciated by Southeast Asian or Pacific Island countries that

²⁴ Ido Vock, "Why EU Support for France over AUKUS Has Been Muted," *New Statesman*, September 22, 2021 ~ <https://www.newstatesman.com/world/europe/2021/09/why-eu-support-for-france-over-aukus-has-been-muted>.

²⁵ "2022 French Presidential Election: The Geopolitical Challenges," Ifri, 2022 ~ <https://ifrimaps.org/en/french-elections-2022/geopolitical-challenges-1/the-indo-pacific-rebuilding-french-engagement-after-aukus>.

want to retain their own agency, Paris's stance might not be seen as specific or instrumental enough to "make or break" a deal or strategic partnership. Nor does its strategic autonomy stance seem efficient in shaping China's perceptions, as Beijing certainly would perceive Paris as siding with Washington in the case of a crisis in the Taiwan Strait, for example. Rather, France's position provides Beijing with an opportunity to use such rhetoric to try to drive a wedge between Western allies and causes confusion in the minds of France's partners.

Finally, if France maintains a dogmatic approach to strategic autonomy, it could end up being marginalized. For example, despite having been consulted by the United States on its Partners in the Blue Pacific—an initiative that aims to coordinate policies with like-minded partners in the Pacific Islands—France decided not to formally join the partnership on the grounds that it would send the wrong strategic signal to China. However, France's decision led to incongruity as countries such as Germany and South Korea joined the grouping, leaving France at risk of appearing isolated rather than independent in the absence of offering any credible alternative.²⁶

Lack of means. The Australian decision to enter the AUKUS deal also called into question France's capacity to act as a balancing power in the region. Despite political rhetoric about the Indo-Pacific being a high priority, the resources that France can mobilize in the region remain very limited. With the distance between countries in the Indo-Pacific and mainland France being so great, any deployment of French military assets requires significant effort. The modest sovereignty forces prepositioned in Réunion, French Polynesia, and New Caledonia are already saturated with constabulary missions in the French exclusive economic zone, as well as participation in regional cooperative law enforcement activities, humanitarian assistance and disaster response schemes, and defense diplomacy. Hence, it is difficult for Paris to pretend to offer reassurance to countries in the Indo-Pacific region that feel threatened by China.

²⁶ Mathieu Droin et al., "The United States and France: Partners for the Pacific Islands Region?" Center for Strategic and International Studies, Commentary, November 30, 2022 ~ <https://www.csis.org/analysis/united-states-and-france-partners-pacific-islands-region>.

Recommendations for Ensuring a Sustainable, Credible, and Realist French Strategy for the Indo-Pacific

France's strategic ambition in the Indo-Pacific remains that of acting as a balancing power.²⁷ But the context makes this overambitious: Paris has neither the capacity nor the diplomatic weight to play such a role, especially in the Indo-Pacific.²⁸ This growing gap damages the credibility of French strategy in the Indo-Pacific and should be addressed to ensure a more sustainable approach.

France should adopt a more modest and realistic posture by positioning itself as a “constructive Indo-Pacific stakeholder”—one that pragmatically addresses major crosscutting issues and advances its interests to ensure regional stability while remaining clear-eyed about its capacity and real influence. It should defend its liberal interests, values, and principles unequivocally. This posture will enable France to associate with relevant and effective initiatives or groupings. Paris should also build on its specific posture as the leading European actor in the Indo-Pacific to act as a convening power by proactively establishing networks and clusters on matters of interest. In particular, France should adapt its posture toward the region by removing the brakes and building up coordination to play more of a stakeholder role.

Remove the brakes. France will have to clarify its position on the U.S.-China rivalry. Paris must be clear that it shares Washington's core values but wishes to keep some room to maneuver vis-à-vis certain U.S. choices driven by interests that it might not share. Considering the alarming tensions in the Taiwan Strait, Paris should send clear signals that France would side with the United States and Taiwan in case of any aggression by China. This should be understood as a way to maintain the status quo in the region and dissuade China from making any risky moves. It would also be seen by key partners in the region as a significant move to complicate China's strategic calculus.

²⁷ Céline Pajon, “France: The Leading European Power in the Indo-Pacific,” in “Europe's Indo-Pacific Embrace: Global Partnerships for Regional Resilience,” ed. James Bowen, Perth U.S.-Asia Center and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, September 2021; and Nicolas Barré, “Emmanuel Macron: L'autonomie stratégique doit être le combat de l'Europe” [Emmanuel Macron: “Strategic Autonomy Must Be Europe's Fight”], *Les echos*, April 10, 2023 ~ <https://www.lesechos.fr/monde/enjeux-internationaux/emmanuel-macron-lautonomie-strategique-doit-etre-le-combat-de-leurope-1933493>.

²⁸ Cédric Perrin et al., “La stratégie Française pour l'Indopacifique: Des ambitions à la réalité” [The French Strategy for the Indo-Pacific: From Ambitions to Reality], Sénat, Rapport d'information, January 25, 2023 ~ <https://www.senat.fr/notice-rapport/2022/r22-285-notice.html>.

At the same time, France should design a strategy of conditional engagement with China and work to better understand Chinese perceptions. In this regard, it should intensify consultations with China's neighbors that have developed a real expertise and ability to recognize nuances in China's signaling (in priority order, Japan, South Korea, and Singapore). France, and Europe as a whole, should also realize and make use of their own economic significance vis-à-vis China in terms of markets, strategic equipment, and regulation.

Beyond China, France should address its colonial history in the Indo-Pacific, as its legitimacy to act in the region largely derives from its overseas territories.²⁹ It must make efforts to consult its overseas territories and co-construct its future Indo-Pacific approach, which has been so far designed in Paris and imposed in a top-down manner, even though these territories are essential strategic players in the area. The lack of consultation has caused confusion and misunderstanding. France should also better resource its territories so as to better match its rhetoric with its actions. By more deeply and responsively integrating its Indo-Pacific territories into its regional strategy, France could better assume its position and send a positive signal to the global South, which is being wooed with anti-Western rhetoric by China and Russia.

France must also invest in its defense capacity in the region. The modernization of patrol boats is ongoing, with a new class entering service this year in Polynesia and Réunion, but this is far from enough to tackle the challenges. France should additionally consider setting up another *point d'appui* (support point) closer to hotspots in the western Pacific and the Bay of Bengal, such as Singapore.

Build up coordination with the EU and the United States. To be convincing, France's strategy must act within an empowered EU approach to the Indo-Pacific, as this will leverage French power and influence and help advance a holistic approach. The EU's capacity to function in the Indo-Pacific will depend on its ability to ensure internal cohesion and act as a geopolitical power.³⁰ As a diversity of interests coexist within the EU, a coalition of willing countries should ambitiously take the lead on strategy toward the Indo-Pacific, and France must play a central role in this.

²⁹ Hans Kundnani, "Le passé impensé: Pour un récit critique Européen" [The Unthought Past: A European Critical Narrative], *Le grand continent*, October 26, 2021 ~ <https://legrandcontinent.eu/fr/2021/10/26/le-passe-impense-pour-un-recit-critique-europeen>.

³⁰ Daniel Fiott and Luis Simón, eds., "Centre of Gravity: Security and Defence in the Indo-Pacific—What Role for the European Union?" Centre for Security, Diplomacy and Strategy, CSDS In-Depth, December 2022 ~ <https://brussels-school.be/sites/default/files/Centre-Of-Gravity-December-2022.pdf>.

France must also adequately coordinate with the United States, or else it risks missing out on important information, opportunities, and developments that are relevant to its interests and will be seen as a maverick by its European partners. Transatlantic coordination, not only through the EU-U.S. high-level dialogue on the Indo-Pacific set up in the fall of 2021 but also increasingly within NATO, is considered essential by many European partners for acting in the security and defense realms in the Indo-Pacific.³¹ Similarly, several Indo-Pacific partners are stepping up their engagement with NATO and see it as relevant to discuss security issues in the region with transatlantic partners.³²

Coordination can mean complementarity with the United States. France and the EU can offer Indo-Pacific nations a solid and credible option focused on the needs of the region's countries and on areas where they can offer real added value (for example, capacity building on maritime security, standards, norms, infrastructure financing, cyber governance, and production chain resilience from Europe).³³ France and the EU can thus complement a more militaristic U.S. approach. Such a focus on countries' needs and functional cooperation could then be facilitated by subregional strategies.³⁴

At the same time, Paris should consider associating itself with some U.S.-led initiatives, especially on nontraditional security issues. For example, France has been participating, on its own and through EU regional programs such as CRIMARIO (part of the EU's Critical Maritime Routes Program that is focused on the Indian Ocean), to build up capacity in the Indo-Pacific in various dimensions of maritime security, including maritime domain awareness. Hence, it would be relevant to work on coordinating with the United States on similar initiatives such as the Quad's Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness.³⁵ The changing nature of the Quad, as well as the expansion of its domains for cooperation,

³¹ Germany and the Netherlands, for example, mention the role of NATO in their Indo-Pacific strategies, which differs from France.

³² Yoshimasa Hayashi, "Japanese FM: It's Time to Deepen Cooperation," *Politico*, April 5, 2023 ~ <https://www.politico.eu/article/japan-foreign-minister-time-deepen-cooperation-nato-eu>; and Helena Legarda, "China and Russia Bring NATO and the Indo-Pacific Together," *Internationale Politik Quarterly*, July 14, 2022 ~ <https://ip-quarterly.com/en/china-and-russia-bring-nato-and-indo-pacific-together>.


³³ Zachary Paikin et al., "The South China Sea and Indo-Pacific in an Era of 'Multipolar' Competition: A More Targeted EU Response?" Centre for European Policy Studies, Joint Research Paper, no. 14, February 2023, 25.

³⁴ Perrin et al., "La stratégie Française pour l'Indopacifique: Des ambitions à la réalité."

³⁵ "Fact Sheet: Quad Leaders' Tokyo Summit 2022," White House, Press Release, May 23, 2022 ~ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/05/23/fact-sheet-quad-leaders-tokyo-summit-2022>.

provides opportunities for France (and the EU) to cooperate on an ad hoc basis. Recently, the French ambassador to the Indo-Pacific pointed to possible coordination with the Partners in the Blue Pacific format with the United States, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and the United Kingdom, especially on maritime security and climate change.³⁶

Conclusion

France alone cannot shape China's or the United States' choices in the Indo-Pacific. A more modest, practical ambition is to contribute to shaping a favorable geostrategic order alongside other partners. To do so, Paris must make the choice not to remain in its ambiguous "balancing power" posture and to coordinate with the United States when U.S. and French interests align and when the impact is positive. Staying dogmatic on a "nonprovocative" approach toward China will be useless, and even counterproductive, especially if China already sees France as a U.S. ally. Finally, France needs to better coordinate with the EU and European partners to advance a common strategy. To do this, the EU must do its own homework and improve its internal cohesion to be able to act more flexibly on the international scene. Ultimately, the growing tensions in the Taiwan Strait should prompt France to clarify its Indo-Pacific role and position in the mounting U.S.-China great-power rivalry, as an open conflict over Taiwan would have devastating and unavoidably global implications. 

³⁶ Marc Abensour, "Indo-Pacifique: Un même concept, des approches différenciées" [Indo-Pacific: One Concept, Different Approaches], *Revue internationale et stratégique* 1, no. 129 (2023): 146.

UK Policy on the Indo-Pacific: Balancing Global Ambition in an Era of Resource Scarcity and Rising Insecurity

John Nilsson-Wright

The United Kingdom's formal articulation of its policy toward the Indo-Pacific dates from 2021 and is associated with two key policy documents: *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy* (hereafter the Integrated Review), which articulated a position for “global Britain in a competitive age,” and the government's Defence Command Paper *Defence in a Competitive Age*, also published in 2021.¹ The review advocated a “tilt” toward Asia, with a focus primarily on engaging economically and politically with the region and secondarily on advocating for an expanded UK military role in addressing critical security issues in the region. This essay examines the origins, rationales, and policies set forth in the UK government's tilt toward the Indo-Pacific; addresses the UK's areas of strength operating in the region; assesses challenges toward actualizing the tilt's objectives; and concludes with recommendations for UK policy.

The Origins of the UK's Indo-Pacific Tilt

In the aftermath of Britain's 2016 Brexit decision to leave the European Union, the foreign policy outlined in the Integrated Review was intended to highlight the UK's global activism and advance an ambitious agenda that would compensate for the perceived potential diminution of Britain's international profile.² Specifically, the government envisaged Britain as

JOHN NILSSON-WRIGHT is the Fuji Bank University Associate Professor in Modern Japanese Politics and International Relations and a Fellow of Darwin College at Cambridge University (United Kingdom). He is also the Korea Foundation Korea Fellow and Senior Research Fellow for Northeast Asia with the Asia-Pacific Programme at Chatham House. In addition, he is a nonresident fellow at the Sejong Institute in Seoul, the Korea Center in the East Asian Institute at the National University of Singapore, and the European Center for North Korean Studies at the University of Vienna. He can be reached at <jhs22@cam.ac.uk> or on Twitter <@JNilssonWright>.

¹ Cabinet Office (United Kingdom), *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy* (London, March 2021), 6 ~ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/global-britain-in-a-competitive-age-the-integrated-review-of-security-defence-development-and-foreign-policy>; and Ministry of Defence (UK), *Defence in a Competitive Age*, CP 124 (London, March 2021) ~ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/974661/CP411_-_Defence_Command_Plan.pdf.

² Jamie Gaskarth, “Strategy, Tactics and Tilts: A Networked Approach to UK Influence in the Indo-Pacific,” *RUSI Journal* 167, no. 6–7 (2022): 12.

acting as “the greatest single European contributor to the security of the Euro-Atlantic area to 2030,” while simultaneously being “deeply engaged with the Indo-Pacific as the European partner with the broadest and most integrated presence.”³

In part, the tilt was also intended to reflect the changing dynamics of international politics, particularly the emergence of multipolarity, the rise of middle powers in place of Cold War-era ideological blocs, and the shift of the “geopolitical and economic center of gravity...eastward towards the Indo-Pacific.”⁴ It was additionally a reaction to the rise of a more assertive China and the associated increased importance of systemic competition between democratic and authoritarian regimes.⁵

To its critics, including academics,⁶ former civil servants,⁷ and politicians in both houses of the British parliament,⁸ the tilt has suffered from several key shortcomings: a failure both to conceptualize UK policy strategically and to match ends with means in a clearly defined manner; an ad hoc, scattered approach to foreign policy that runs the risk of being reactive, unfocused, and vague;⁹ an overly confident sense of Britain’s relevance and influence in the region; a hubristic and hypocritical defense of values and Britain’s credibility as an upholder of democratic norms;¹⁰ and a tendency to exaggerate the Indo-Pacific’s geoeconomic importance to Britain’s national interests.¹¹ In terms of addressing key security challenges, the review, particularly in recent months, has also been criticized for failing to identify China explicitly as a threat and for appearing to signal

³ Cabinet Office (United Kingdom), *Global Britain in a Competitive Age*, 60, 9, as quoted in Gaskarth, “Strategy, Tactics and Tilts,” 12.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 26–27.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁶ Catherine Jones, “Assurance and Deterrence in the UK’s East Asia Policies,” *RUSI Journal* 167, no. 6–7, (2022): 54–63.

⁷ Harry Lambert, “Simon McDonald: ‘It’s the End of the Game for Britain,’” *New Statesman*, May 13, 2023 ≈ <https://www.newstatesman.com/the-weekend-interview/2023/05/simon-mcdonald-interview-end-game-britain>.

⁸ See, for example, UK Parliament, House of Lords, International Relations and Defence Committee, “The UK and China’s Security and Trade Relationship: A Strategic Void,” HL Paper 62, September 10, 2021; UK Parliament, House of Commons, Foreign Affairs Committee, “Refreshing Our Approach? Updating the Integrated Review,” December 18, 2022 ≈ <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5803/cmselect/cmaff/882/report.html>; and UK Parliament, House of Lords, International Relations and Defence Committee, “UK Defence Policy: From Aspiration to Reality?” HL Paper 124, January 12, 2023 ≈ <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld5803/ldselect/ldintrel/124/124.pdf>.

⁹ Gaskarth, “Strategy, Tactics and Tilts,” 12.

¹⁰ Jones, “Assurance and Deterrence in the UK’s East Asia Policies,” 57.

¹¹ Christopher M. Dent, “The UK’s New Free Trade Agreements in the Asia-Pacific: How Closely Is It Adopting U.S. Trade Regulation?” *Pacific Review*, February 26, 2023 ≈ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09512748.2023.2181862>.

insufficient engagement with European security issues, especially following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

The Integrated Review Refresh

With the government of Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's publication of the Integrated Review Refresh in March 2023, Britain has sought to refine its approach while also addressing the criticisms of its earlier policies. This has involved citing the increased pace and complexity of geopolitical change and the associated challenges of forecasting this increased instability. To address these developments, the government has identified four key policy priorities:

1. *Shaping the global strategic environment.* This approach appears to be an effort to address the claim that the government has been insufficiently strategic in its approach. The policy also reiterates the earlier claim that China is a systemic competitor, but it now frames this as epoch-defining, with Beijing seeking to "shape a China-centric international order more favorable to its authoritarian system" in a manner that is coercive and "undermine[s] individual rights and freedoms."¹² This language is presumably an effort to signal seriousness of intent while intentionally sidestepping calls to explicitly identify China as a threat in ways that more hawkish critics, whether in the UK or elsewhere, might have preferred.
2. *Bolstering deterrence and defense to guard against increasingly volatile threats to UK security.* As part of this priority, the Integrated Review Refresh stresses the centrality of NATO, as well as the importance of combating Russia in the short term and "supporting the self-defence and restoration of sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine."¹³ This policy involves increasing defense spending by 5 billion pounds over two years as well as the aspiration to increase the defense budget from 2.2% of GDP to 2.5%.¹⁴
3. *Enhancing the stability of the UK economy and society while also taking steps to limit high-risk investment in critical infrastructure and sensitive technologies.* This approach aims to improve domestic economic, health, and energy policies while also partially addressing the China challenge, given earlier controversial investment by China's Huawei in

¹² Cabinet Office (UK), *Integrated Review Refresh 2023: Responding to a More Contested and Volatile World* (London, March 2023), 8 ~ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/integrated-review-refresh-2023-responding-to-a-more-contested-and-volatile-world>.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Britain's 5G phone network. (Plans for the investment have since been canceled in response to U.S. sanctions.)¹⁵

4. *Investing in the UK's unique strengths in science and technology.* This priority focuses on increasing the resilience of the UK by enhancing the country's specialization in science and technology—particularly in innovation, artificial intelligence, and cyber—by committing to spending 20 billion pounds per year on research and development by 2024 or 2025.¹⁶

At first glance, the Integrated Review Refresh appears to have addressed the main criticisms of the government's earlier Indo-Pacific policy by setting out the nature of the Chinese challenge to UK interests and by noting the immediate priority of focusing defense and security policy on the Ukraine war and developments in the Euro-Atlantic theater. Equally, the commitments to increased defense spending and to strengthening Britain's science and technology resilience and capacity offer some indication of the government's ability to balance ends and means—a key requirement of any coherent strategic policy. That said, as the following analysis demonstrates, there remain serious questions about the overall coherence of the UK's approach to the Indo-Pacific region.

Strengths of the UK's Policy toward the Indo-Pacific

Flexibility and alignment. A notable feature of Britain's approach to the Indo-Pacific is its convergence with the approaches of other global actors, most notably the United States, which is arguably Britain's key international partner.¹⁷ In particular, the Biden administration's own dual-track approach to international cooperation, set out clearly in the United States' 2022 National Security Strategy,¹⁸ highlights the importance of working with both like-minded liberal democracies and geopolitical rivals. Notwithstanding growing concerns about China as a strategic rival, the Sunak administration's recognition of the need to work with China on

¹⁵ "Huawei to Be Removed from UK 5G Networks by 2027," National Cyber Security Centre (UK), Press Release, July 14, 2020 [~ https://www.gov.uk/government/news/huawei-to-be-removed-from-uk-5g-networks-by-2027](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/huawei-to-be-removed-from-uk-5g-networks-by-2027).

¹⁶ Cabinet Office (UK), *Integrated Review Refresh* 2023, 4.

¹⁷ International Institute for Strategic Studies, "Global Britain: Implications for UK Military Strategy and Capability," *Strategic Comments* 27, no. 7 (2021): ix–xi [~ https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13567888.2021.1989557](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13567888.2021.1989557).

¹⁸ White House, *National Security Strategy* (Washington, D.C., October 2022) [~ https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf](https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf).

key issues, such as climate change, reflects this inherent pragmatism and avoidance of narrow, ideological binary choices.¹⁹

Similarly, the Sunak administration's stress on fostering a diversity of partnerships (both old and new) demonstrates the inherent flexibility underpinning British policy in the region. These efforts have included fostering bilateral ties with India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Thailand, and Vietnam, among others, as well as minilateral and multilateral cooperation through key institutional frameworks. These frameworks include the following:

- *The Australia–United Kingdom–United States (AUKUS) security trilateral.* In San Diego on March 14, 2023, the leaders of the three countries reaffirmed this minilateral and highlighted joint cooperation in the production of a new fleet of nuclear-powered submarines. This cooperation will deliver substantial manufacturing opportunities for the UK while enhancing Australia's defense capabilities in the Indo-Pacific.²⁰
- *The Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).* The UK finally joined the CPTPP in March 2023, providing British industry with potential access to a market that represents 13% of global GDP.²¹
- *The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).* Britain became an ASEAN dialogue partner in August 2021, the first new country to assume this status in 25 years.²²
- *The Five Power Defence Agreements.* Since 1971, this set of agreements has linked the Commonwealth countries of Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia, New Zealand, and the UK.

Network partnerships. The UK government's commitment to a variety of partnerships, along with the government's focus on "shaping an open and stable international order,"²³ can be seen as addressing the criticism that its Indo-Pacific vision lacks strategic coherence. It also matches the Biden

¹⁹ Cabinet Office (UK), *Integrated Review Refresh 2023*, 3.

²⁰ Demetri Sevastopulo and Jasmin Cameron-Chileshe, "AUKUS Allies Unveil Plan to Supply Australia with Nuclear-Powered Submarines," *Financial Times*, March 14, 2023 ~ <https://www.ft.com/content/b4d7a277-095a-4e33-9fbc-d05395885522>.

²¹ Department for Business and Trade and Department for International Trade (UK), "The UK and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership," March 31, 2023 ~ <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/the-uk-and-the-comprehensive-and-progressive-agreement-for-trans-pacific-partnershipcptpp>.

²² "UK Becomes ASEAN Dialogue Partner," British Embassy Manila (UK), August 6, 2021 ~ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-becomes-asean-dialogue-partner>.

²³ Cabinet Office (UK), *Integrated Review Refresh 2023*, 8.

administration's concept of a "lattice-work" approach to regional and global issues noted in the United States' 2022 National Security Strategy, which states, "We are creating a lattice-work of strong, resilient, and mutually reinforcing relationships that prove democracies can deliver for their people and the world."²⁴ This approach is also potentially consistent with the ideas underpinning network theory, which some academics have suggested provides a fruitful basis for addressing regional and global uncertainty.²⁵

Britain has already demonstrated its capacity to take an initiating or catalyzing role in fostering regional coordination. This has occurred most notably in Europe through initiatives such as the Joint Expeditionary Force, which dates from 2014 and brings together ten North European countries to address regional security concerns.²⁶ Similarly, in a minilateral context, Britain has taken the lead in fostering cooperation on defense and security with Poland and Ukraine via a trilateral pact to enhance cooperation on cybersecurity, energy provision, and combating disinformation.²⁷

Of the UK's existing partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region, Japan and ASEAN stand out as particularly positive examples. Britain's deepening partnership with Japan is arguably the UK's most significant regional bilateral relationship, and certainly Japan is seen as "the [UK's] closest security partner in Asia."²⁸ UK ties with Japan have increased substantially in recent years, fostered in part by the efforts of the late prime minister Shinzo Abe's administration to develop a more proactive foreign and security policy, and especially in the wake of the 2017 UK-Japan Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation.²⁹ UK-Japanese cooperation now extends across a range of issue areas: joint military exercises involving all three branches of the UK forces with their Japanese counterparts, substantial joint projects to foster technical and industrial cooperation in the production of vital

²⁴ White House, *National Security Strategy*, 12.

²⁵ See, for example, Yee-Kuang Heng, "Japan's Significance for the United Kingdom's Shaping Ambitions in the Indo-Pacific," *East Asian Policy* 14, no. 3 (2022); Gaskarth, "Strategy, Tactics and Tilts"; Saeme Kim, "Fitting South Korea in the United Kingdom's Indo-Pacific Tilt," *Asian Politics & Policy* 15, no. 1 (2023): 113–27; and Andrew Yeo and Kuyoun Chung, "A Relational Approach to Indo-Pacific Strategies: South Korea's Role in a Networked Regional Architecture," *Asian Politics & Policy* 15, no. 1 (2023): 5–20.

²⁶ UK Parliament, House of Lords, International Relations and Defence Committee, "UK Defence Policy," 12.

²⁷ Gaskarth, "Strategy, Tactics and Tilts," 14.

²⁸ "House of Lords Select Committee on International Relations and Defence, 'The UK's Security and Trade Relationship with China,' Government Response," UK Parliament, November 23, 2021, 19 ~ <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/7935/documents/82325/default>.

²⁹ Heng, "Japan's Significance for the United Kingdom's Shaping Ambitions in the Indo-Pacific," 52.

defense equipment,³⁰ and joint capacity-building assistance initiatives focusing on maritime security, cybersecurity, and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.³¹ In January 2023, after five years of negotiation, London and Tokyo announced a new bilateral reciprocal access agreement that further consolidates the extensive security partnership—the first time that Japan and a European country have reached such an ambitious undertaking to allow the reciprocal stationing of forces in one another’s countries.³²

Likewise, Britain has steadily been building up its multilateral partnership with ASEAN with a range of initiatives, not only via its dialogue partner status but also through trade deals with individual Southeast Asian states, its appointment of an ambassador to ASEAN in 2019, and its continuing aspiration to join the ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting-Plus and to participate in the ASEAN Regional Forum.³³ Such efforts have bolstered Britain’s status in the region to the extent that opinion polls suggest that the UK is conspicuously ahead of other countries, such as South Korea and India, in being seen locally as a “preferred strategic partner” and trusted external power.³⁴

Continuity, presence, and convening power. Beyond building and maintaining partnerships, the Indo-Pacific tilt and its reaffirmation in the Integrated Review Refresh represent continuity with past patterns of British engagement in East Asia rather than an explicit change of direction. As early as 2012, then prime minister David Cameron, together with 35 British business executives, traveled to Japan, South Asia, and Southeast Asia to promote Britain’s ties in the region. Britain has undertaken strategic partnerships or dialogues with countries in the region, including with Vietnam in 2010 and Thailand in 2013, and deepened ties with ASEAN overall in 2012 when it joined ASEAN’s Treaty of Amity and Cooperation.³⁵

Moreover, Britain has been strenuously seeking to raise its physical presence in the region via symbolic naval deployments, most notably the dispatch of the UK Carrier Strike Group to the region in 2021 and the

³⁰ The most conspicuous example being the Global Combat Air Programme, a three-way initiative between the UK, Japan, and Italy to develop a new generation fighter aircraft. UK Parliament, House of Lords, International Relations and Defence Committee, “UK Defence Policy,” 12.

³¹ Heng, “Japan’s Significance for the United Kingdom’s Shaping Ambitions in the Indo-Pacific,” 12.

³² Louisa Brook-Holland, “The UK-Japan Defence Agreement 2023,” House of Commons Library, research briefing 9704, January 13, 2023, 5 ≈ <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9704/CBP-9704.pdf>.

³³ Laura Southgate, “UK-ASEAN Relations and the Balance of Power in Southeast Asia,” *RUSI Journal* 167, no. 6–7 (2023): 66–67.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 64.

³⁵ Kim, “Fitting South Korea in the United Kingdom’s Indo-Pacific Tilt,” 14–15.

decision in September 2021 to forward deploy two offshore patrol vessels, HMS *Tamar* and HMS *Spey*, to the Indo-Pacific for a minimum of five years.³⁶ Such deployments not only signal engagement with the region but can also potentially bolster regional deterrence initiatives by facilitating naval exercises with other regional partners or, in some instances, guarding against potential security contingencies—for example, forestalling potential proliferation efforts by North Korea. The carrier strike group initiative has also importantly helped demonstrate UK-U.S. bilateral security cooperation, given the presence of a U.S. Marine Corps F-35B squadron and the destroyer USS *The Sullivans* as part of the deployment in 2021.³⁷

Consistent with network theory’s focus on the benefits of integrating and coordinating relationships, the UK government has stressed its ability to bring diverse partners together in the Indo-Pacific region. As the government noted in March 2023, “[The Ministry of] Defence’s contribution to the Indo-Pacific Tilt will be exemplified through our role as a convening power. We will deepen our regional collaboration and cooperation through dedicated bilateral engagement and a greater role within institutional frameworks such as ASEAN and Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) and the Five Eyes partnership.”³⁸

Reinforcing the theme of continuity, senior UK politicians, notably Foreign Secretary James Cleverly, have underlined that Britain’s commitment to the Indo-Pacific is a permanent one. Britain, Cleverly has noted, is “here to stay.”³⁹ In doing this, the UK is building on a long tradition of security partnerships in the region, including a British base in the British Indian Ocean Territory, an Army presence in Nepal and Brunei, and a network of defense attachés in the region.⁴⁰

Institutional innovation. Importantly, the focus on the Indo-Pacific has been complemented by institutional bureaucratic developments that give greater attention to the region. Since September 2020, and in the wake of the merger of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office with the Department of International Development to create the new Foreign, Commonwealth and

³⁶ Peter Magill and Wyn Rees, “UK Defence Policy after Ukraine: Revisiting the Integrated Review,” *Survival* 64, no. 3 (2022): 92–93.

³⁷ John F. Bradford, “U.S. Perspectives and Expectations Regarding the UK’s Tilt to the Pacific,” *RUSI Journal* 167, no. 6–7 (2023): 28.

³⁸ “Government Response to the International Relations and Defence Committee’s Report ‘UK Defence Policy: From Aspiration to Reality?’ (1st report of Session 2022–23, HL Paper 124),” UK Parliament, 12 \approx <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/34336/documents/189159/default>.

³⁹ Gaskarth, “Strategy, Tactics and Tilts,” 12.

⁴⁰ “Government Response to the International Relations and Defence Committee’s Report,” 13.

Development Office (FCDO), there has been a conscious decision to widen the geographical remit of Britain's traditional engagement with East Asia to include India within a new Indo-Pacific directorate spanning both the Pacific and Indian Oceans. In this way, Britain's move matches the expanded regional outlook of countries such as Japan, India, and Australia.⁴¹ Inside the FCDO, the government has also committed to increase its training of staff with a linguistic and cultural understanding of China beyond the current sixty or so officials with qualifications in Mandarin Chinese.⁴² Similarly, within the Ministry of Defence, the January 2022 creation of the secretary of state's Office for Net Assessment and Change might be expected to boost Britain's ability to think and plan creatively about its key security and political partnerships in addressing core challenges in the region.⁴³

Challenges to the UK's Indo-Pacific Tilt

Security capacity constraints. A key challenge for the government in delivering on its bold promise to be "the European partner with the broadest and most integrated presence" in Indo-Pacific, while also being "the greatest single European contributor to the security of the Euro-Atlantic area to 2030," will undoubtedly be capacity constraints. With only one of Britain's two aircraft carriers deployable at any one time, it is questionable to what degree a carrier strike group can always be available to be sent to the Indo-Pacific. Moreover, with just 20 surface ships, the UK's naval strength lags well behind other countries (for example, the United States with 124 and China with 80), and so it is highly doubtful that the UK could do much more other than act in a symbolic and supporting role in the event of an Indo-Pacific conflict.⁴⁴

Given these constraints, it may be more appropriate for the UK to prioritize its military commitments by concentrating on Europe-Atlantic security issues in order to allow the United States to focus on the Indo-Pacific, a point that has been implicitly suggested by U.S. Secretary

⁴¹ Shaun Breslin and Peter Burham, "International Order Transition and the UK's Tilt to the 'Indo-Pacific,'" *Pacific Review* 36, no. 2 (2023): 10.

⁴² Amanda Milling MP, minister of state for Asia, written correspondence to the Baroness Anelay of St Johns, UK Parliament, February 9, 2022, 2 ~ <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/8935/documents/152371/default>.

⁴³ UK Parliament, House of Lords, International Relations and Defence Committee, "UK Defence Policy," 73.

⁴⁴ Bradford, "U.S. Perspectives and Expectations Regarding the UK's Tilt to the Pacific," 27.

of Defense Lloyd Austin.⁴⁵ However, even within the European theater, Britain's defense preparedness is seriously compromised. Unable to field even a single armored infantry division,⁴⁶ confronting serious munitions stock constraints as a result of the war in Ukraine, and anticipating a planned reduction in the size of the army from 76,000 to 72,500,⁴⁷ Britain faces a major credibility gap in delivering on its security commitments. Moreover, inflationary pressures mean that even the aspiration of the Sunak administration to boost defense spending to 2.5% (which is already contentious given the lack of a specific date for realizing this goal) means that the UK will at best be able to maintain its current level of (inadequate) security preparedness.

Trust issues. Material limits are also compounded by trust issues, given doubts regarding the potential reliability of Britain's security intentions. European leaders, for example, could be forgiven for questioning whether the UK is capable of and genuinely serious about closer coordination with the EU on security matters, whether in Europe or within the Indo-Pacific. While the EU's own 2021 Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific offers the opportunity in theory for harmonizing UK and European efforts in the region, the post-Brexit UK-EU Trade and Cooperation Agreement of December 2020 "does not include provisions for structured cooperation on foreign policy, defense or external security."⁴⁸

Comparable coordination challenges affect individual UK-European country partnerships. For example, notwithstanding the March 2023 summit meeting between Prime Minister Sunak and President Emmanuel Macron of France and discussions regarding the possibility of a permanent European maritime presence in the Indo-Pacific, the distrust arising from the abrogation of a planned submarine deal between France and Australia in favor of the AUKUS agreement has left a legacy of bitterness and resentment between Paris and London that may be difficult to overcome, especially given the additional persistence of long-standing bilateral disputes over immigration and fishing.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Bradford, "U.S. Perspectives and Expectations Regarding the UK's Tilt to the Pacific," 31.

⁴⁶ UK Parliament, House of Lords, International Relations and Defence Committee, "UK Defence Policy," 29.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁴⁹ Jamal Barnes and Samuel M. Makinda, "Testing the Limits of International Society? Trust, AUKUS and Indo-Pacific Security," *International Affairs* 98, no. 4 (2022): 1309.

Distrust is not merely an issue between the UK and its European partners; when it comes to working with Indo-Pacific countries, similar concerns may prove an obstacle. Post-colonial legacies and the perception by senior Indian politicians that Britain has adopted a patronizing and condescending approach to bilateral ties may restrain active cooperation both on security matters and on making progress on a free trade agreement between the UK and India,⁵⁰ notwithstanding the goal of enhanced bilateral ties underscored in the UK-India “Roadmap to 2030” agreement. Similarly, though the momentum behind AUKUS continues, UK-Australia cooperation in the region may encounter problems. As one analyst put it, “neither Canberra nor London is wholly convinced of each other’s capacity to shape the Indo-Pacific strategic environment in positive ways.”⁵¹

Exaggerated economic expectations. Limitations in the security space may be matched by exaggerated expectations regarding the economic opportunities associated with Britain’s presence in the Indo-Pacific region. Joining the CPTPP will be undoubtedly a helpful boost to UK trade and investment in the region. Similarly, the new Hiroshima Accord signed by Prime Ministers Sunak and Fumio Kishida of Japan shortly before the G-7 Summit in Japan in May 2023 promises, among other things, some 18 billion pounds worth of Japanese investment in the UK.⁵²

However, it is worth keeping in mind that trade with Europe represents 42% of Britain’s exports and 48% of its imports, which far eclipses the UK’s trade with the Indo-Pacific.⁵³ Moreover, in joining the CPTPP, Britain has acted as a rule-taker rather than a rule-maker, accepting wholesale U.S.-inspired regulatory norms affecting digital trade, intellectual property, and agricultural and food standards.⁵⁴ These norms may prove incompatible with European regulatory provisions and complicate future trade deals between the UK and Europe.

⁵⁰ Breslin and Burham, “International Order Transition and the UK’s Tilt to the ‘Indo-Pacific,’” 14; and Prabash Ranjan, “India-UK Investment Relations and ‘Global Britain,’” *King’s Law Journal* 34, no. 1 (2023): 2.

⁵¹ Ian Hall, “AUKUS and Australia-UK Strategic Reconvergence” *RUSI Journal* 167, no. 6–7 (2023): 35.

⁵² Sam Blewitt, “Sunak and Japanese PM Sign Deal on Closer Defence and Security Ties,” *Independent*, May 19, 2023 ~ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/fumio-kishida-japanese-hiroshima-prime-minister-rishi-sunak-b2341467.html>.

⁵³ Matthew Ward and Dominic Webb, “Statistics on UK-EU Trade,” House of Commons Library, research briefing, May 11, 2023 ~ <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-7851/CBP-7851.pdf>.

⁵⁴ Dent, “The UK’s New Free Trade Agreements in the Asia-Pacific,” 25.

Evidence from recent free trade negotiations, including the December 2021 free trade agreement negotiated between the UK and Australia, suggests that Britain has been too willing, for political expediency and to achieve symbolic nominal evidence of post-Brexit “success,” to reach accords that do little, if anything, to advance the UK’s national interest.⁵⁵ Where Britain has been especially eager to secure positive new economic partnerships, including in Southeast Asia, the results so far have been mixed.⁵⁶

Tensions between liberal values and national interests. In recent years, prominent British politicians have been keen to stress the UK’s commitment to democratic norms. For example, during her tenure as foreign secretary, Liz Truss made clear her “ambition for the UK to be the beating heart of a global network of liberty, advancing our values, such as free enterprise, opportunity and democracy.”⁵⁷ While statements such as this are consistent with the robust language of the UK government in, for example, criticizing China for repression of the Uighur population in Xinjiang⁵⁸ and curtailing political freedoms in Hong Kong, in other areas, Britain’s policies have suggested a more self-serving and, at times, inconsistent view of global norms. For example, efforts to renegotiate the Northern Ireland Protocol, the 2019 attempted proroguing of Parliament, the sale of arms to Saudi Arabia, the treatment of foreign migrants (including the attempted enforced deportation of migrants to Rwanda), and calls for the abolition of the UK Human Rights Act and for a withdrawal by the UK from the Council of Europe all suggest that Britain has been “drawing back its support for, and compliance with, human rights norms.”⁵⁹

At the same time, cuts in Britain’s spending on development aid from 0.7% to 0.5% of GDP and concerns regarding a lack of consultation and transparency in aid provision suggest both a weakening of Britain’s commitment to global poverty reduction and the possibility that aid budget reductions may be ceding important diplomatic opportunities to rival

⁵⁵ Dent, “The UK’s New Free Trade Agreements in the Asia-Pacific,” 15.

⁵⁶ Southgate, “UK-ASEAN Relations and the Balance of Power in Southeast Asia,” 67.

⁵⁷ “House of Lords Select Committee on International Relations and Defence, “The UK’s Security and Trade Relationship with China; Government Response,” 16.

⁵⁸ “UK Government Announces Business Measures over Xinjiang Human Rights Abuses,” Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (UK), Press Release, January 12, 2021 ~ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-government-announces-business-measures-over-xinjiang-human-rights-abuses>.

⁵⁹ Sean Molloy and Rhona Smith, “Advancing Human Rights in a Post-Brexit Era: Global Britain or Wavering Britain?” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* (2022): 3 ~ <https://doi.org/10.1080/0957571.2022.2044756>.

countries, such as China, which have been active in using aid policy to advance their strategic objectives in the global South.⁶⁰

Invariably, states need to balance the pragmatic pursuit of national interests alongside the advancement of democratic values and the rule of law, but in so doing, Britain should guard against appearing hypocritical or inconsistent and avoid the more grandiloquent language favored by some politicians in recent years. Striking this balance will, most likely, become more important in the future, especially given the prominence of more hawkish voices on China-related issues across the UK political spectrum and among the British public.⁶¹ A number of recent parliamentary inquiries have criticized Conservative administrations for lacking a coherent China policy—an argument that appears to have merit. At the same time, growing alarm over China’s role as a regional and global challenger may push the current or future government to adopt a more combative approach that exacerbates the very tensions and security risks in the Indo-Pacific that the current policy is seeking to alleviate.

Conclusion

There is clear evidence that Britain has been increasing both the breadth and depth of its engagement in the Indo-Pacific region in recent years. Since the publication of the Integrated Review in 2021, and with the Integrated Review Refresh in 2023, this engagement has become more formalized and explicit as a key part of the government’s foreign policy agenda that encompasses a wide range of economic, diplomatic, and security initiatives.

There is still, nonetheless, an episodic and ad hoc character to the UK’s Indo-Pacific engagement and a lack of coordination of ends and means in delivering on its ambitions. Given the aspirations of “global Britain” in both the Euro-Atlantic and the Indo-Pacific regions, it is reasonable to conclude that Britain “wants to play in every area” in a manner that arguably is unduly complicated and potentially counterproductive.⁶²


It may be sensible for the UK to adopt a less strident and more modest approach, forgoing, or at least reining in, its somewhat dated great-power

⁶⁰ Kamala Dawar, “Global Britain and the National Interest: Development Aid Under the FCDO,” *King’s Law Journal* 34, no. 1 (2023): 11.

⁶¹ Breslin and Burham, “International Order Transition and the UK’s Tilt to the ‘Indo-Pacific,’” 4–5.

⁶² UK Parliament, House of Lords, International Relations and Defence Committee, “UK Defence Policy,” 25.

aspirations that are underscored by its high-profile deployment of naval assets to the region in favor of more traditional middle-power instruments of influence, such as science and technology policy, cyber initiatives, and the application of cultural and soft power more generally. Perhaps the most fruitful area for progress is in bolstering and developing existing and new partnerships with other countries in the region with similar middle-power profiles. Countries such as South Korea, for example—with which the UK signed an ambitious new bilateral framework in June 2022 that encompasses pandemic mitigation, climate change, biodiversity, energy security, education, trade and investment, and security cooperation—may prove ideal key candidates for closer cooperation in the future.⁶³

Flexibility and diversification are key features of the UK's approach to the region, along with a willingness to engage bilaterally, minilaterally, and multilaterally with a range of regional actors. Such engagement necessarily gives the UK a visible presence in the region, but London should be careful not to assume that activism will simply translate into policy coherence. In a world of increasingly limited resources, constrained national budgets, and increasing public ambivalence about supporting ambitious global initiatives, the current administration and its successors would be wise to think carefully when making strategic choices. Deciding what constitutes the best choices will not be easy, but making the call in a far-sighted and dispassionate manner is more necessary now than ever. 

⁶³ See Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (UK), “UK-Republic of Korea Bilateral Framework for Closer Cooperation,” June 30, 2022  <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-republic-of-korea-bilateral-framework>.

What's in an Indo-Pacific Concept? Shared Visions and Varied Approaches

Alison Szalwinski

Beginning in the late 2000s, the United States, as well as two of its allies in Asia—Japan and Australia—began to articulate variations of the geopolitical concept of the “Indo-Pacific.” The idea of linking the Pacific and Indian Oceans into a broader geographic region was not entirely new, but the accompanying strategic overlay, which was introduced as part of the “free and open Indo-Pacific” concept, imbued the idea with new and significant implications for how these three countries would approach foreign policy, economic coordination, and military posture in the region and within their broader national strategies.

As each of these three democracies elected new leaders over the next two decades, subsequent administrations across political parties generally reaffirmed and built on the idea of the “Indo-Pacific,” refining their visions for a free, open, prosperous, and secure two-ocean region in contrast with China’s increasingly assertive behavior. By 2022, many countries in the Indo-Pacific region and elsewhere—including France, Indonesia, South Korea, and the United Kingdom—had announced their own version of an Indo-Pacific vision, concept, or strategy, as had both the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the European Union.

At present, the United States, South Korea, and France have all published official policy documents identifying an Indo-Pacific Strategy. Japan refers to its “free and open Indo-Pacific” vision or plan, while Indonesia has an Indo-Pacific concept. Perhaps most surprisingly, Australia lacks any dedicated government document or policy speech outlining an Indo-Pacific vision, instead electing to articulate its approach within its broader national security, foreign policy, and defense strategy papers. The United Kingdom similarly has outlined its thinking on an Indo-Pacific tilt within defense policy documents, while the Pacific Island countries and territories eschew “Indo-Pacific” as a defining construct but identify as a “Blue Pacific Continent” and have clarified regional security interests and priorities in the Boe Declaration on Regional Security.

ALISON SZALWINSKI is Vice President of Research at the National Bureau of Asian Research (United States). She can be reached at <nbr@nbr.org> or on Twitter <@aliszali>.

While these roundtable essays do not attempt to detail all of the Indo-Pacific concepts that have been developed by individual countries (India, Germany, and Canada also have their own versions, for example), the visions articulated across each of these nations share some similarities: each of these countries is a democracy that has expressed increasing levels of concern about the shifting balance of power in the Indo-Pacific region and the ramifications of U.S.-China competition. The texts of the Indo-Pacific concepts developed by these countries also share some elements and phrases in common, even among states with very different national interests, histories, and priorities. For instance, the terms “free,” “open,” “cooperation,” “connectivity,” “prosperity,” “inclusive,” “rule of law” or “international law,” and “secure/security” appear as core principles in almost all of them. “Peace,” “freedom of navigation,” “climate change,” “human rights,” and “resilience” are also frequent touchpoints, although less universal. Finally, along with these guiding principles, the essays highlight three areas of strategic convergence among these countries: (1) a designation of Southeast Asia and the Pacific Island region as key areas of engagement, (2) an emphasis on the importance of maritime security and cooperation, and (3) a reliance on multilateral coordination to address shared interests.

First, in their Indo-Pacific concepts, each of the countries agrees that Southeast Asia (and members of ASEAN, in particular) are key to the success of a broader Indo-Pacific concept. Deeper relations among ASEAN members are seen as essential, both against the backdrop of China’s growing influence and in recognition of the contributions that ASEAN can make to the region as the nexus of economic activity. As Natalie Sambhi notes, Indonesia itself favors the idea that ASEAN holds a place at the center of the Indo-Pacific region, shaping its guiding principles and norms.

In addition, almost all the countries’ Indo-Pacific concepts point to the growing importance of the Pacific Island region to the connectivity and economic development of the Indo-Pacific. Junya Nishino’s essay states that “among the Pacific Islands, Japan is supporting infrastructure projects and an undersea telecommunications cable project (with Australia and the United States), aiming to overcome vulnerabilities and enhance connectivity,” an effort that aligns with not only the goals of Australia and the United States but also a growing interest from Indonesia, South Korea, and others to strengthen relations with the Pacific Island countries and territories (PICTs). The subregion is also the subject of increasing tensions in the U.S.-China relationship. In their essay on the PICTs, authors Henryk Szadziewski and Anna Powles comment that “the heightened geostrategic

environment of the Indo-Pacific—and the plethora of foreign strategies and policies aimed at the Pacific Islands—have been prompted by the increased political, security, economic, diplomatic, and cultural profile of the People’s Republic of China.”

Identifying these subregions as key to the Indo-Pacific aligns well with the second common theme found across the Indo-Pacific concepts: the importance of the maritime domain. The archipelagic nature of both Indonesia and the Pacific Islands makes an emphasis on maritime issues central to establishing a secure and prosperous region and in the interest of all involved states, with capitals both near and far. From maritime domain awareness to freedom of navigation and respect for international law at sea to cracking down on illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, maritime security will remain key to uniting the visions of Indo-Pacific countries, which together span vast swaths of sea and whose economies rely heavily on ocean-based industries.

Finally, as the third commonality across approaches to the region, multilateralism lies at the heart of the underlying Indo-Pacific concept. In the United States, the Biden administration has placed major emphasis on strengthening alliances and partnerships and, in particular, expanding beyond traditional alliances to identify ways that groupings of states can come together around discrete and specific sets of interests. The Quad (Australia, India, Japan, and the United States) and Australia–United Kingdom–United States (AUKUS) are notable examples of new, formalized minilateral and multilateral groupings, but various longstanding regional bodies, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, the East Asia Summit, and the Pacific Island Forum, have contributed to the widespread preference of many Indo-Pacific nations for cooperation and engagement in multilateral settings. Multilateral coordination is also a useful tool to blunt pressure and influence from China, which has often found greater success in pushing its interests forward when dealing with countries bilaterally.

In other areas, the Indo-Pacific concepts discussed in this roundtable offer visions that differ from one another, that seek to address a range of perceived issues and concerns, and that serve varying roles within each country’s broader national strategy. The first distinction is obvious in the aforementioned variety of titles and terms applied to the official speeches, policy documents, and government publications that define how a country is thinking about the “Indo-Pacific,” from the more policy-oriented “strategies” to the broader “visions” to the most nebulous “concepts.” For the most part, the differing terminology reflects the variety of bureaucratic

ways governments are organizing the process of conceptualizing and then acting on these concepts.

Another major difference underlying countries' Indo-Pacific concepts is the degree to which competition with China is a driving factor. For the United States, Japan, and Australia, the need to reconceptualize their national strategies and approaches to the region was largely driven by changes in the security environment of the Indo-Pacific that have resulted from China's rising power and military modernization. With each change, Washington, Tokyo, and Canberra have seen a distinct, sometimes rapid evolution in perceptions of China, from a country whose geopolitical rise could be shaped to its current place as a strategic competitor.

Other countries have had less dramatic or complete shifts in their policies toward or alignment with China but have recently seen a need to formalize support for the existing rules-based order. The Republic of Korea is notable in this regard, cautiously resisting any regional efforts that could be labeled as "anti-China" for several years but recently orienting its foreign policy approach less toward the Korean peninsula and more toward the Indo-Pacific concepts of other "like-minded" partners. Both France and the United Kingdom—largely Atlantic powers but with territories and exclusive economic zones in the Indo-Pacific—also see a role for themselves in stabilizing the rules-based order in conjunction with regional partners.

Finally, Indonesia stands out as an example of the view—shared and reflected in the ASEAN Outlook for the Indo-Pacific—that "the Indo-Pacific construct is designed and functions to mitigate the negative impacts of great- and rising-power competition—not only between the United States and China but also between China and India as well as China and Japan." In this sense, Indonesia and the Pacific Islands reject that the Indo-Pacific concept is framed around competition against China and prefer to identify cooperative, inclusive, and affirmative foundations for engaging with the region.

The articulation of Indo-Pacific concepts by the countries in this roundtable, and a growing number of other nations around the world, reflects a shared concern about the shifting power dynamics in the region and the direction of the U.S.-China competition. While each country has its own unique vision and terminology, they all emphasize core principles such as freedom, openness, cooperation, and security. The importance of Southeast Asia, the Pacific Islands, and the maritime domain is recognized by every country with an Indo-Pacific concept or vision,

and multilateral coordination is seen as the way forward for addressing shared interests—both security- and nonsecurity-focused—and to mitigate China’s influence. While competition with China is a driving factor for some countries, others emphasize cooperative and inclusive strategies for engaging and developing the region. Despite differences in approaches and motivations, the Indo-Pacific concepts that have been crafted by this range of countries collectively demonstrate a concerted effort to shape the Indo-Pacific region and maintain a rules-based order. ◆