

Trump's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Trump Strategy: Assessing the Logic

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Since the end of the Cold War, the US has remained the sole superpower in Asia. However, at the turn of the twenty-first century, the rise of China as a major economic and military power, along with its assertive postures and other factors, has led a profound impact on the decades-long power structure in the region. Realising serious repercussions, successive American administrations have taken calibrated efforts to ensure the US' dominance in maintaining security and stability in this region. Coming to power in 2017, the Trump administration rolled out his new "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy" (FOIP) to protect America's supremacy in the fast-changing geostrategic, economic and political realities in Asia.¹ Subsequently, the Trump administration announced to invest \$113 billion to promote digital, connectivity, energy and infrastructure in the region.² The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) among the US, India, Australia and Japan was revived as a regional security provider and the US also changed the name of its Pacific Command to the Indo-Pacific Command in 2018, largely in recognition of India's growing importance in the US' Asia policy, apart from other initiatives.

However, making India as a pillar of the FOIP strategy, apart from economic, security and other initiatives, does not clearly explain how the US would really succeed in promoting a "free and open Indo-Pacific." In fact, the FOIP strategy faces serious conceptual, strategic, economic, practical and other challenges in attaining its goal. For India and the US, the two differ with each other on several important aspects of the FOIP, ranging from the geographical definition of the Indo-Pacific to the nature of QUAD, how to deal with China and others. This article therefore seeks to understand the nature, strategic imperatives and direction of the US Indo-Pacific strategy.

The Concept of the Indo-Pacific as a Geopolitical Region

While the term "Indo-Pacific" has gained huge currency in the recent times, its genesis can be traced back to 1920 when Karl Ernst, a German

scholar, used *IndopazifischerRaum* in his book entitled *Geopolitics of the Pacific Ocean*.³ During the Cold War, the US formed the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) and the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SATO), with the intent of building a strong alliance system in the region, which is today known as the Indo-Pacific. In the 1960s Australian experts started arguing that without having balance between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Australia's national security cannot be secured. In 2007, Indian strategic expert Gurpreet Khurana began to use this concept on official occasions.⁴

However, much of the credit should go to the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe for recolonising the term "Indo-Pacific," in the contemporary times. In fact, his speech in Indian Parliament in 2007 provided the necessary impetus to the idea of the "Indo-Pacific." Addressing the Indian Parliament in August 2007, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe talked about the 'confluence of the two seas. 'The Pacific and the Indian Oceans are now bringing about a dynamic coupling as seas of freedom and of prosperity. A "broader Asia" that broke away geographical boundaries is now beginning to take on a distinct form. Our two countries have the ability – and the responsibility – to ensure that it broadens yet further and to nurture and enrich these seas.⁵

However, due to reluctance of President George W. Bush, Abe could not pursue the Indo-Pacific concept further. But, on his return to power in 2012, Prime Minister Abe once again began the initiative towards building an Indo-Pacific strategy. In December 2012, Abe wrote an article, proposing the concept of "Asia's Democratic Security Diamond", which aims at linking India, Japan, the US and Russia together. He further said, "The peace, stability and navigation freedom in the Pacific Ocean are inseparable from those of the Indian Ocean"⁶

Australia also used the Indo-Pacific in its white papers *Australia in the Asian Century* and the *Security Strategy* published in 2012 and 2013 respectively.⁷ In 2013, Japan Institute of International Studies published a report under the title of Security Order in Asia in which it is stated that a new "Indo-Pacific Security Complex" is emerging on the basis of the traditional security mechanism in Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia.⁸

For the US, though the Obama administration continued to use the Asia-Pacific as the regional theater of its Rebalancing/Pivot to Asia strategy, American officials also occasionally mentioned the "Indo-Pacific" as a new region construct. In October 2010, the US State Secretary Hillary Clinton said in a speech in Hawaii about "expanding

our cooperation with the Indian Navy in the Pacific because we know the importance of the Indo-Pacific Basin to the global trade and commerce”.⁹ One year later, Hillary Clinton wrote in the article *America's Pacific Century*, “We are expanding our alliance relations with Australia from the Pacific partnership to the Indian Ocean partnership”. In July 2013, the US Vice President Biden mentioned that the US regards the “Indo-Pacific” as an integral part of the future of Asia. Thus, by the time the Obama administration was about to leave the White House, the concept of Indo-Pacific had already captured the imagination of American experts and diplomats.

The Trump Administration and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific

After the coming of the Trump administration to power in 2017, the US finally decided to adopt the “Indo-Pacific” as a region, instead of the “Asia-Pacific.” The first sign of this shift appeared in the joint statement which was issued after the first meeting between Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Donald Trump. It mentioned about the two sides’ “commitment to peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific.”¹⁰ On October 18, 2017, the former US Secretary of State Tillerson, speaking at the American Center of Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), mooted the concept of “free and open Indo-Pacific” and underscored the need for the US, India, Japan and Australia to work together in promoting peace, security and prosperity in the region.¹¹ During his Asia tour to Japan, South Korea, China, Vietnam and the Philippines on 5–14 November 2017, Trump frequently used the idea of the Indo-Pacific in his speeches. Subsequently, the US National Security Strategy (NSS) formally conceptualized the “Indo-Pacific” in 2017 as a unified strategic theater and the US National Defence Strategy also motioned this terminology. The NSS, explaining the rationale behind the FOIP concept, argued that “a geopolitical competition between the free and representative vision of the world order is taking place in the Indo-Pacific.” More importantly, calling “China, along with Russia, as revisionist powers challenging America’s power influence and interests in the region,” the Trump administration’s “Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision” is built on “the principles of expanding the maritime space, improving interoperability with partners, strengthening rule of law, civil society and transparent government and lastly, enabling private sector-led economic development.”¹²

In other to realise this strategy, the Trump administration has taken several measures. President Trump signed the 2019 National Defense

Authorization Act which authorizes \$717 billion in defense spending.¹³ The Trump Administration revived the concept of the “Quad.” Australia, India, Japan, and the United States held senior official consultations on the Indo-Pacific in November 2017 in Manila. Senior officials from the United States, Australia, India, and Japan then met in June 2018 and “reiterated strong support for ASEAN centrality and ASEAN-led mechanisms in the evolving regional architecture.”¹⁴ The Quad raises the role of values, as well as interests, in regional security groups. The U.S. Pacific Command was renamed the Indo-Pacific Command. Secretary of State Pompeo announced the Trump Administration’s intent to provide \$300 million in security assistance to improve security relationships across the Indo-Pacific.¹⁵ This security assistance would fund projects related to maritime security—including in Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands as well as the Bay of Bengal- Humanitarian Assistance/Disaster Relief, Peacekeeping Operations, and Countering Transnational Crime. On July 30, 2018, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced “\$113.5 million in new U.S. initiatives to support foundational areas of the future: digital economy, energy, and infrastructure,” and indicated that this represented “just a down payment on a new era in U.S. economic commitment to peace and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region.”¹⁶ The United States, Japan, and Australia have formed a trilateral partnership to mobilize investment to “foster a free, open, inclusive and prosperous Indo-Pacific.” Secretary Pompeo also referenced legislation in Congress that would reorganize, and in some case expand, U.S. trade and development programs, including the Better Utilization of Investments Leading to Development (BUILD) Act. He stated that the House-passed bill would more than double (to \$60 billion dollars) the U.S. government’s development finance capacity.¹⁷

The Drivers of the FOIP

Sure, the Trump administration’s decision to adopt the Indo-Pacific concept did not grow in a vacuum. In fact, there are some fundamental reasons for this move. First, the Asia-Pacific region has 3 of the world’s biggest economies, 7 of the world’s 8 fastest growing markets, and 7 of the world’s 10 heavily armed forces, with its economic aggregate accounting for 60% of the world total. In 2015, Asia replaced North America and Europe to become the world’s largest economic region. For example, 9 of the world’s top 10 ports are located in South and East Asia. The former US Assistant Secretary of Defense Chas Freeman is convinced that “the Indo-Pacific region is the new economic center in the world, and the balance of power here is also changing. The Indo-

Pacific region is currently a fulcrum of the global geopolitics". At the same time, the economic pattern of the Asia-Pacific region has undergone major changes. Starting from the economic vassal of the US and Europe, the Asia-Pacific region has gradually turned into a self-contained economic entity, where regional economic integration has become increasingly prominent. In this circumstance, the Asia-Pacific region has "an emerging Asian strategic system including the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean, partly due to the geographical expansion of the national interests and activities of China and India, and partly due to the continued strategic role and existence of the US in the two regions".

Secondly, the Indo-Pacific initiative is a natural result of the US strategic adjustment. The US has long been pursuing a bigger vision. In the Bush administration, the US Asia-Pacific policy revolved around Central Asia and South Asia. The foundation of Indo-Pacific is the G4. Thirdly, among China's rise is the biggest stimulating factor. Strategically, the US seeks a balance among Asian countries. This balance has a two-fold meaning. First and foremost, there should not be a dominant country in Asia, nor should a strategic integration under the leadership of any country. Furthermore, any form of Asian integration is unwelcome to the US, especially in the field of political security. In this context, both Japan and India have to seek a dominant position in their sub-region, while acknowledging the multipolar pattern of Asia. Based on this structure, they try to pursue the position as a world power. The US, Japan and India all have deep concern about China's rapid development over the past three decades. In their eyes, the rise of China has broken the strategic balance of Asia, while the rise of the continental Asia means that a potential new Asian pattern is conceived with China at the center. Particularly, China has proposed the Belt and Road Initiative, an initiative which simultaneously contains the Indo-Pacific oceans and the Eurasia continent. With this initiative, common grounds among countries in the area shall be strategically enlarged and exploited.¹⁸

With the rise of China, the bilateral balance between China and Japan, and that between China and India are broken, and the Asia-Pacific countries are obviously losing their ability to contain China except for the US, while the traditional US-Japan and US-Australian alliances are not sufficient to contain the influence and impact of China. In the context of the relative decline of the US itself, it is necessary to invite India to work as a new geographical factor to counterbalance China. India is not included in the traditional sense of the Asia-Pacific concept. In order to have India included and to optimize the strategy of the US and India, some countries proposed the Indo-Pacific Initiative.¹⁹

Challenges

Whatever may be the imperatives for the Trump administration to coin the Free and Open Indo-Pacific, it is equally true that basing India as a pillar of the FOIP strategy, along with these economic, security and other initiatives does not clearly explain how the US would really succeed in promoting a “free and open Indo-Pacific.” In fact, the FOIP strategy faces serious conceptual, strategic, economic, practical and other challenges in realizing its goal. For the US, the geographical boundary of the “Indo-Pacific” region stretches from the west coast of the US to the west coast of India. But, for India, it extends to the western Indian Ocean. Consequently, India wants to strengthen ties with America not only in Northeast and Southeast Asia, but also in the western part of the region. In particular, India seeks further cooperation with the US on promoting peace and security in Afghanistan, effectively dealing with terrorism emerging from Pakistan’s soil, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and others. India also wants to establish its supremacy in the India-Ocean, given its geographical and strategic locations.

The US, on the other hand, seeks to maintain its dominance over seas. Thus, in future, there would be the conflict of strategic interests between the two countries. At the same time, while India is facing the problem of naval capabilities and its modernization, the US continues to be reluctant in sharing several high technology-equipped weapons with India. Washington has also not shown its interest in helping New Delhi to modernize its Navy. India’s understanding about the “Free and Open Navigation,” is also quite opposed to that of America in the sense that India does not allow the movement of navies of other countries without prior information through its exclusive economic zones or territorial waters. While India wants to promote a multi-polar Asia, the US seeks to dominate the region through the FOIP.²⁰

On the question of China, India and the US have different views. The US “Indo-Pacific strategy” has declared the containment of China as its main purpose. India does not want to openly confront China. Instead, while India is trying to improve ties with China, it is also expanding its footprints in China’s Neighbourhood, improving strategic infrastructure in the northeast region with the intent of effectively meeting security threats coming from Beijing. In fact, At the Shangri La Dialogue in June 2018, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi made it clear that India will not become part of any such alliances which aim to contain China. He further said, “India does not see the Indo-Pacific region as a strategy or as a club of limited members. Nor as a grouping that seeks

to dominate.” At the same time, India is also unhappy about the fact that the Trump administration has not shown its willingness to address India’s economic concerns emanating from the implosion of high tariffs on some of India products and other issues. India is also disturbed by the US’ Iran policy, as the Trump administration has asked countries to stop oil import from Iran or face sanction. India is also worried about President Trump’s announcement of US troops’ withdraw from Afghanistan because it will, in turn, cause huge security implication for India. The US has also taken any effort towards inducting India in the US-led Indo-pacific Business Forum in Washington. The Trump administration has not yet included India in its \$113 billion infrastructure project.²¹

At the same time, the US’ Indo-Pacific strategy faces some serious fundamental economic and security contradictions. While economically, Indo-Pacific is increasingly getting connected, with China being the anchor of this shift; the Trump administration has come out with an attractive infrastructure development proposal to the Belt Road Initiative (BRI) that could attract the countries of the region towards America. On the contrary, the Trump administration withdrew the US from the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership. The US has not yet indicated how its “Indo-Pacific strategy” will boost several regional groupings. While the regional countries want the US’s strong presence in the region to effectively check China’s assertive posturing, they are not inclined to openly take the US’ side in its efforts to contain China. In turn, the countries of the “Indo-Pacific” are disturbed by the fact that the containment of China is the principal objective of the US “Indo-Pacific strategy.” In addition, the inclusive and cooperative ethos of the regional countries, state-specific issues, and their efforts to promote a multi-polar order in Asia among other localized factors will also have a profound impact on the future direction of the “Indo-Pacific strategy.”

Though Quadrilateral Security Dialogue was revived in 2017, there are differences of views among the US, Japan, Australia, and India. At the same time, since only four countries do not constitute the “Indo-Pacific,” the US has not yet taken initiatives to develop a regional security policy. Even the purpose and means of the QUAD have reminded unexplained. It does not have a formal institutional structure to promote security aspects of “free and open Indo-Pacific.” In addition, while regional security integration is the focus of the ongoing power-shift in the “Indo-Pacific,” the promotion of economic integration could emerge as the main regional agenda in near future, given the increasing economic activities in the region.²²

Conclusion

It now has become very much clear that the FOIP faces some serious contradictions and geo-strategic and geo-economic complexity and unless the Trump administration address these challenges, the concept of the Free and open Indo-Pacific will continue to remain only a vision than a strategy. In doing so, the US should revisit its America First policy, because it is directly against the foundation of its FOIP concept. The Trump administration should not equate its allies, friend and foes alike. This approach in fact has been a major factor for countries like Japan and India to look at an alternative approach towards promoting a rule-based multi-polarity in Asia. The US should propose a comprehensive economic and security structure, instead of just taking some ad-hoc efforts aimed at containing China.

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Trump's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Trump Strategy: Assessing the Logic

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Sumit Kumar

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