

THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION AND THE 'FREE AND OPEN INDO-PACIFIC'

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Trump administration rolled out a new “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” concept in late 2017. Since this point, the administration’s new strategy has generated as many questions as it has answers. Despite dramatic shifts in many aspects of U.S. foreign policy after the 2016 election, there are notable areas of continuity between the Trump administration’s Indo-Pacific concept and the Asia policies of previous administrations. The most obvious area of consistency is its stated aim: “a free and open Indo-Pacific ... where sovereign and independent nations, with diverse cultures and many different dreams, can all prosper side-by-side, and thrive in freedom and in peace.”¹ While aspirational, this statement reflects the relatively constant way the United States has defined its interests in the Pacific over many years.

Beyond this aspirational goal, the Trump administration’s Indo-Pacific concept endorses the conventional building blocks of U.S. engagement in the Indo-Pacific region: building collective security through a network of regional allies and partners, promoting economic prosperity, and encouraging good governance and shared principles. The administration has rolled out a number of initiatives, including increased engagement in the Indian Ocean and Pacific Islands region, regional transparency and anti-corruption plans, and digital infrastructure and energy cooperation programs, which support these goals. The administration’s Indo-Pacific concept also rightly acknowledges the need to respond more forcefully to Beijing’s destabilizing behavior and coercion of regional allies, which has undermined both U.S. interests and the sovereignty of Indo-Pacific partners.

However, obvious incongruities between the president’s instincts — as encapsulated by his “America First” slogan — and the ambitions of the administration’s Indo-Pacific strategy have undermined its implementation.

Rather than rallying a more unified collective strategy to preserve regional openness and stability, the administration has often alienated needed partners with confrontational rhetoric that is aimed at allies and adversaries alike. The president has frequently berated regional allies over issues ranging from host-nation support costs to trade. The administration’s heavy reliance on sanctions and tariffs has created discrete winners and losers on the economic front, as opposed to a long-standing American focus on building broad-based prosperity. And inconsistent adherence to U.S. values and principles, including praising authoritarian leaders and shying away from critiques of regional human rights abuses, has weakened American soft power.

Despite early concerns that the Trump administration might walk away from the U.S. pivot to Asia, there are elements of consistency in its Indo-Pacific strategy that confirm Asia’s important place in American

foreign policy. These consistent themes provide ample room for a strong trilateral agenda with close regional partners including Australia and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states.

The principal weakness of the administration's approach thus far is that by attempting to marry strategic competition with the nationalism of the president's America First vision, it has muddied the waters of U.S. strategy. The president's threat-centric, protectionist rhetoric implicitly suggests the United States has walked away from what has made American leadership so distinct: its emphasis on promoting collective goods rather than pursuing narrow, unilateral aims.

INTRODUCTION

The surprise election of Donald Trump in 2016 raised significant questions about the future of U.S. engagement in the Indo-Pacific region. The Obama administration's "rebalance to Asia" was viewed in many quarters as an unfulfilled promise and there was little, if any, certainty about President Trump's own foreign policy priorities.

The Trump administration moved quickly to roll out a new "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) strategy in advance of President Trump's first visit to the region.² However, the administration's implementation of this strategy has been inconsistent. The positive and relatively conventional aspects of its Indo-Pacific strategy have been over-shadowed and undermined by broader muscle movements in U.S. foreign policy, including the downward spiral in U.S.-China relations and the president's erratic instincts on alliance policy and international trade. The result has been a frequent disconnect between the rhetoric and reality of the administration's Indo-Pacific narrative, making it more challenging to rally support for U.S. initiatives as well as to send clear signals to adversaries.

This paper explores the key themes and drivers of the Trump administration's Indo-Pacific strategy, outlining areas of consistency and change from previous U.S. administrations. It also evaluates implementation of the administration's strategy, arguing that tensions between the Indo-Pacific narrative and the administration's more confrontational foreign policy instincts have frequently undermined U.S. goals. Finally, this paper looks forward, addressing opportunities for the United States to better align its

Indo-Pacific initiatives with partners in Australia and Southeast Asia.

THE U.S. FREE AND OPEN INDO-PACIFIC CONCEPT: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

After early uncertainty about whether the U.S. "rebalance to Asia" would endure after the 2016 presidential election, the Trump administration moved quickly to outline its own FOIP concept in late 2017. The first articulation of the administration's new concept was previewed by then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson in a speech at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.³

The initial rollout of the Indo-Pacific concept appeared less notable for what was new than what had remained the same. The most cited elements of the administration's new policy were the move to reframe the scope of U.S. strategy, by centering U.S. interests within a broader Indo-Pacific region, and to re-focus multilateral cooperation around large regional democracies, highlighted by the administration's emphasis on a U.S.-Japan-Australia-India quadrilateral dialogue (known as "the Quad"). Yet both of these initiatives drew on ideas first endorsed by the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations.⁴ Beyond "the Quad" and "the Indo-Pacific," the administration's rhetorical emphasis on regional security networks and shared principles were consistent with long-standing U.S. policy in the region. At the outset, the administration's Indo-Pacific strategy therefore suggested less a major rewrite of U.S. policy than a more traditional shift in emphasis between Democratic and Republican administrations.

The rollout of several strategic documents, including the U.S. National Security Strategy and the National Defense Strategy, soon made clear that despite many areas of continuity, more fundamental shifts were underway in U.S. foreign policy. The challenge for the Trump administration has been to reconcile these continuities and discontinuities within its approach to the Indo-Pacific.

America and the Indo-Pacific: Steady interests and shifting threats

The most obvious area of consistency between the Trump administration's strategy and those of earlier U.S. administrations is its stated aim: "a free and open Indo-Pacific ... where sovereign and independent nations, with diverse cultures and many different dreams, can all prosper side-by-side, and thrive in freedom and in peace."⁵ While aspirational, this statement reflects the relatively consistent way the United States has defined its interests in the Pacific over many years. As Michael Green argues, the central impulse of American strategy in the Pacific has been to ensure "the Pacific Ocean remains a conduit for American ideas and goods to flow westward, and not for threats to flow eastward toward the homeland."⁶ In support of this interest, the United States has long made it a priority to protect the openness of Pacific sea lanes (and more recently, the "global commons"), promote a liberal political and economic order in the region, and maintain a robust military presence to deter instability and conflict.

U.S. foreign policy has also long been premised on the notion that maintaining a "free and open" Pacific requires the United States to prevent the rise of a regional power that could restrict U.S. access or establish a more insular regional order inimical to U.S. interests. It is this objective that serves as a departure point for the Trump administration's new strategy. Until relatively recently, there was little indication that U.S. policymakers saw an existential threat to American interests in the Indo-Pacific. Hilary Clinton's 2011 Foreign Policy article, "America's Pacific Century," painted a relatively optimistic view of the Asian region, focused on its geopolitical influence,

economic dynamism, and movement toward "a more mature security and economic architecture."² The focus of the U.S. rebalance strategy was to enhance U.S. influence and consolidate positive momentum in a region of increasing geostrategic importance.

By contrast, the Trump administration's 2017 U.S. National Security Strategy provides a notably different threat assessment. It describes a "geopolitical competition between free and repressive visions of world order" underway in the Indo-Pacific, with China seeking to "challenge American power, influence, and interests ... [and] erode American security and prosperity."⁷ This document represented the U.S. government's first attempt to openly wrestle with a new reality: For the first time in decades, the United States was contending with a regional competitor with the necessary economic and military power to challenge some of its most vital interests.

New trends in American foreign policy

Flowing from this altered threat assessment, the Trump administration's strategy re-envisioned the ways in which the United States should pursue its aims. Under the banner of President Trump's "America First" vision, U.S. foreign policy has been re-centered around the idea of global "competition." Although President Trump's America First message has not been embraced across the U.S. electorate, the idea that America needs to compete and restore U.S. "advantages in key areas" has gained bipartisan traction.⁸ The root causes of this shift preceded the president's election. Two factors — one domestic and one foreign — help explain the current shift in U.S. foreign policy.

For several decades, U.S. leaders have enjoyed relatively bipartisan support for a liberal internationalist foreign policy, one rooted in the belief that removing interstate barriers to trade and commerce, promoting good governance and democratization, and enmeshing states into rules-based international institutions would advance American interests. Two decades of declining economic and military dominance, lengthy overseas

military interventions, and rising inequality have undermined support for this approach.

President Trump's belief that liberal internationalism has failed in rather serious ways is one that now resonates with many parts of the American public. Americans have not given up on global engagement; this is clear from repeated surveys.⁹ There is, however, bipartisan momentum behind the idea that America should do more to alter the terms of international leadership. On the economic front, politicians on both the right and left have become more skeptical of the relative costs and benefits of U.S. trade agreements, an issue that has found particular resonance in the decade following the 2008-2009 Great Recession. Although most Americans still endorse free trade in principle, 2017 Gallup polls showed widespread support for President Trump's commitment to renegotiate existing U.S. agreements.¹⁰ Similarly, while support for U.S. alliances is stronger than ever, the president's rhetoric about the need for allies to "pay their fair share" has found support in many quarters. One recent poll indicated nearly 50% of the public believed that the United States should not have to honor its commitments to NATO if allies did not increase their defense spending.¹¹

Beyond changes in U.S. domestic politics, the idea of a more competitive U.S. foreign policy is also a response to the changing nature of U.S.-China relations. The Trump administration's National Security Strategy made clear that the administration would no longer adhere to the dual-track approach of engagement and hedging that had characterized U.S.-China relations for over 30 years, instead doubling down on "strategic competition" with Beijing. In part, this shift reflects changes in the structural underpinnings of the U.S.-China relationship. Beijing's rapid accrual of economic, military, geopolitical, and technological power has created new domains of competition with Washington, expanding mutual friction points into areas such as emerging technologies and global governance. The result, as Evan Medeiros has argued, is that "primacy of competition has become a core feature of the US-China relationship."¹²

However, the bipartisan pessimism about U.S.-China relations that now pervades U.S. policymaking is driven less by the reality of China's rise than by frustration over how China has chosen to use its increased power. Over the past few years, Chinese leaders have more aggressively wielded tools including military operations in the South and East China Seas, domestic political influence campaigns, and economic boycott threats to coerce other nations and limit U.S. influence. U.S. concerns about these actions have grown since Xi Jinping took the helm in China. President Obama and Xi Jinping famously discussed a "new model" for U.S.-China ties in their 2013 Sunnylands Summit, but the tension between Washington and Beijing became more obvious throughout President Obama's second term. Even as the Obama administration continued to seek new diplomatic accords to manage areas of disagreement, other actions, such as pressing China on state-sponsored cyber-espionage and initiating new U.S. Freedom of Navigation operations in the South China Sea, presaged a downward trend in the bilateral relationship.¹³

RECONCILING COMPETITION AND THE FREE AND OPEN INDO-PACIFIC

At first glance, the basic building blocks of the Trump administration's Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy appear conventional. They are consistent with long-standing principles of U.S. engagement in the Pacific — building collective security through a network of regional allies and partners, promoting economic prosperity, and encouraging good governance and shared principles. Yet the liberal international vision these principles support is fundamentally misaligned with the president's own view of the world and incongruent with the administration's America First message. The administration has attempted to reconcile this misalignment by orienting both its Indo-Pacific strategy and the America First message around the idea of competition. Pursuing a more competitive strategy need not be incompatible with traditional tenets of U.S. leadership. In fact, China's aggressive behavior towards its neighbors creates new opportunities, and a greater need, to defend

these long-standing principles and rally a stronger collective response to Beijing's destabilizing behavior. But in execution, the president's narrow America First narrative alters the perceived aims of this competition, often undermining the stated objectives of the administration's Indo-Pacific initiatives. This section explores some of these tensions in the Trump administration's Indo-Pacific strategy.

Reorienting alliances and partnerships

The U.S. alliance and partnership network has been the centerpiece of American strategy in Asia since World War II, and the principal means through which the United States promotes collective security in the Indo-Pacific. For the past two administrations, the United States has worked to expand this network beyond its traditional emphasis on Northeast Asia, increasingly focusing on new U.S. partnerships in Southeast and South Asia. The Trump administration's pointed move to embrace an "Indo-Pacific" construct builds on this trend, reflecting not only American efforts to more fully incorporate India into the East Asian strategic environment, but also to recognize the connectivity between the Indian and Pacific oceans.

Despite these positive developments, the broader trend line for U.S. alliances and partnerships has been far more negative under the Trump administration.

One notable development under the Trump administration has been its focus on expanding U.S. engagement with smaller nations in the Indian Ocean and Pacific Islands regions. In South Asia, the administration has worked to tighten relationships with countries such as Nepal and Sri Lanka, offering new high-level dialogues and assistance that includes \$500 million toward infrastructure development in Nepal and a high-endurance Coast Guard cutter for Sri Lanka.¹⁴ In Southeast Asia, the administration has prioritized engagement

in the Mekong region, including a new Japan-U.S. Mekong Power Partnership and additional funding to counter transnational crime and trafficking.¹⁵ The administration has also offered new forms of technical assistance and advice to countries such as Myanmar that have enabled them to improve the terms of their infrastructure loans with Beijing. Another positive development has been the revitalization of U.S. relationships in the Pacific Islands region, which had long been a relatively peripheral element of U.S. regional engagement.

Beyond enhancing bilateral ties, the Trump administration has also continued earlier administrations' efforts to promote stronger "mini-lateral" networks between U.S. partners. A growing sense of shared concern about Chinese influence has helped propel new momentum for these dialogues in the past few years, facilitating combined naval operations in the South China Sea, collaboration on debt transparency and infrastructure standard setting, and even digital connectivity initiatives. Much attention has been given to the administration's efforts to revitalize the Quadrilateral Dialogue between the United States, Australia, India, and Japan, but the Trump administration has also engaged partners through additional multilateral initiatives. These include agreements with Australia, India, Japan, Singapore, and Taiwan to coordinate development assistance in third-party countries; increased support for the Lower Mekong Initiative; and a new collaboration between the United States, Australia, and Papua New Guinea to modernize the Lombrum naval base.

Despite these positive developments, the broader trend line for U.S. alliances and partnerships has been far more negative under the Trump administration. One of the principal weaknesses of the administration's approach is that it has often created the perception that Washington's interests are misaligned with those of its friends. As noted above, many U.S. allies and partners quietly share the administration's concerns about Chinese influence and its desire to prevent Chinese

hegemony in the region.¹⁶ But this is not their only concern. The president's absence from multilateral venues such as the East Asia Summit, and retreat from cooperation on issues that matter deeply to regional partners, such as climate change, suggests a lack of interest in the region's priorities. This has led partners to vocally express frustration with a U.S. strategy that at times appears less focused on the ambitions and security interests of America's friends than on improving the U.S. position vis-a-vis Beijing.¹⁷

The Trump administration's approach has also exposed fault lines between the United States and its partners over their tolerance for open confrontation with Beijing. In general, U.S. partners envision an Indo-Pacific order that tends to accommodate a greater degree of coexistence, and more limited confrontation, with Beijing than Washington might prefer. In practice, this means U.S. allies and partners are often willing to entertain cooperation in areas where Washington is not, such as Japan's willingness to cooperate with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI),¹⁸ or Singapore's recent decision to sign a new bilateral Singapore-China defense agreement.¹⁹ At times, it also limits their willingness to endorse security initiatives likely to spark friction with Beijing.

Some partners have become increasingly wary of *both* Washington and Beijing.

To some degree, misalignments between Washington and its regional partners are not new or surprising. They reflect differences in the degree to which countries see their economic and political futures as reliant upon productive ties with Beijing. Yet rather than closing these gaps, the Trump administration has often exacerbated them, by creating the impression that ties with China may come at the cost of relations with the United States.

Regional frustration over the confrontational tone of the administration's narrative on 5G technology and "debt trap diplomacy" is often apparent. Regional leaders have complained that Washington's calls to

decouple with Beijing ignore the constraints facing smaller partners, asking U.S. allies to shoulder significant economic and political risk with little upside gain and few available alternatives. As former Malaysian Prime Minister Mohammed Mahathir bluntly argued: "We cannot afford to build these very expensive railway lines. Whether we like it or not, we have to go to the Chinese."²⁰ Nations such as Singapore have expressed concern that U.S.-China strategic rivalry is constraining their strategic space rather than expanding it, making it more difficult for countries to balance between the superpowers.²¹ The result is that some partners have become increasingly wary of *both* Washington and Beijing, with even close allies and partners openly advocating for a more autonomous foreign policy path.

Promoting shared principles

Much like the Obama administration, the Trump administration's Indo-Pacific strategy emphasizes the importance of certain principles of inter-state relations, including respect for state sovereignty and independence; free and fair trade; peaceful resolution of disputes; and respect for international rules, including freedom of navigation and overflight. It has offered support for these principles on various fronts, including expanding U.S. Freedom of Navigation operations in contested areas of the South China Sea, increasing maritime capacity-building support for Southeast Asian and Pacific Island nations, working alongside G-20 leaders to promote new Principles for Quality Infrastructure Investment, and announcing a new \$400 million Indo-Pacific Transparency Initiative. These initiatives are consistent with a long-standing U.S. emphasis on promoting shared rules of the road and norms of behavior in the Indo-Pacific. The administration has also tightened its coordination with allies and partners on this front, developing initiatives such as the Blue Dot Network, which will work with Japan, Australia, and others to promote high standards in infrastructure development.

Once again, however, the administration's own messaging has at times worked at cross-purposes

with its goals. One of the more notable shifts in U.S. messaging under the Trump administration has been its emphasis on “reciprocity” as a core principle of U.S. engagement. In his October 2018 speech at the Hudson Institute, Vice President Mike Pence argued the United States seeks a relationship with China “grounded in fairness, reciprocity, and respect for sovereignty.”²² Much of the administration’s emphasis on “reciprocity” is rooted in frustration over Chinese economic policies, especially Beijing’s use of state subsidies, technology theft, and data localization laws to create an unfair playing field for U.S. companies. These are concerns that resonate with U.S. partners both in and outside the region.

However, the administration has not only targeted Beijing with its reciprocity agenda. Instead, the president has extended his focus to partners across the Indo-Pacific region, repeatedly decrying the unfairness of U.S. alliance relationships. On the economic front, the administration has pressured countries to reduce their trade deficits with the United States, pushed South Korea to update the Korea-U.S. Free Trade agreement, and engaged in a back-and-forth tariff dispute with India.²³ The administration has pressed allies on the security front as well, frequently criticizing the cost of U.S. forces in the Pacific and demanding dramatic increases in host nation support for U.S. forces in South Korea and Japan.²⁴

The administration’s concerns about market access problems and unequal burden-sharing are not without merit and certainly not unprecedented. Previous U.S. administrations often engaged their foreign counterparts in discussions about these issues.²⁵ However, these discussions were rooted in the belief that U.S. alliances generated positive sum gains for both the United States and its partners. President Trump’s rhetoric instead suggests a one-way relationship in which U.S. alliances are a net negative that provide “virtually nothing” to Washington in return.²⁶ By ignoring the ways in which America’s Asian allies have allowed

the United States to pursue its regional interests at a lower relative cost, the president’s rhetoric suggests the United States is less motivated by principles of fairness and mutual benefit than by the pursuit of unilateral gains — even at the expense of its friends.

Equally problematic is the fact that the administration’s embrace of regional principles often appears haphazard and inconsistent. The administration has insistently pursued denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and emphasized its commitment to global counterproliferation efforts.²⁷ Yet the president has also deployed new low-yield nuclear weapons and openly mused that U.S. allies should pursue nuclear programs of their own.²⁸ Despite the administration’s frequent advocacy for democracy and human rights, President Trump referred to democracy protests in Hong Kong as “a complicating factor” in achieving his goal of a trade deal with Beijing.²⁹ Similarly, the president has repeatedly lavished praise on regional leaders such as Kim Jong Un and Rodrigo Duterte, even congratulating the latter for doing an “unbelievable job” in a drug war that has involved thousands of reported extrajudicial killings.³⁰ The legitimacy of American leadership has long resided in its willingness to endorse a consistent set of rules and principles that apply to all nations, both large and small. The inconsistency between the administration’s words and deeds undermines this goal.³¹

Promoting prosperity

The Trump administration’s economic strategy has been perhaps the most contentious, and underdeveloped, element of its Indo-Pacific strategy. As outlined by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, the Trump administration’s economic strategy is centered around promoting “open investment environments, transparent agreements between nations, and improved connectivity.”³² Unlike the Obama administration, which made negotiating the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade agreement the centerpiece of its regional economic strategy,

the Trump administration has instead emphasized its desire to strengthen private sector business and investment ties, and promote entrepreneurship. In part, this emphasis reflects the administration's own domestic economic agenda, but it also aims to draw a contrast with China's state-driven development model, which it has widely criticized as facilitating corruption, poor environmental and labor standards, and unsustainable levels of debt.

In response to early critiques that U.S. strategy lacked a positive economic agenda, the Trump administration articulated three priorities for its regional economic plan: energy security, infrastructure development, and digital connectivity. In support of these goals, the administration rolled out a series of new initiatives, including a trilateral Memorandum of Understanding on infrastructure development with Japan and Australia; ASIA Edge, a new initiative to strengthen regional energy security; and a U.S.-Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Smart Cities partnership to support digital connectivity in Southeast Asia. The administration has also pursued select regional bilateral trade agreements, including an update to the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement as well as a limited trade agreement with Japan.

The absence of a more credible and robust economic strategy has only reinforced China's narrative that the United States lacks the capacity or will to restore the regional economic architecture it once built.

Much like the other elements of its strategy, the Trump administration's economic agenda has been muddled. On the one hand, the administration's desire to boost private sector ties and strengthen energy security and digital cooperation plays to U.S. strengths. Congressional passage of the Better Utilization of Investment Leading to Development (BUILD) Act and the establishment of the new U.S. International Development Finance Corporation complements this work by incentivizing a greater

private sector role within the U.S. development agenda. All of these efforts are consistent with what has been a hallmark American approach to Indo-Pacific development for decades: identifying shared economic priorities that drive growth both at home *and* abroad.

Despite these positive steps, the affirmative elements of the administration's agenda pale in comparison to the more insular aspects of its economic strategy. What has been most damaging on the economic front is the administration's inability to develop a positive narrative on international trade. The most high-profile aspect of the administration's trade agenda has been a negative one for many Asian partners: the wide-ranging tariffs the United States has levied in the trade war between Washington and Beijing. The TPP, which the Trump administration jettisoned early on, signaled America's intent to promote high-standard, free trade across the region. The Trump administration's approach, by contrast, has been more divisive. Some countries, such as Vietnam and Bangladesh, have benefited from the redirection of global supply chains away from Beijing.³³ Other U.S. partners, including South Korea, Singapore, and Japan, have experienced slowing economic growth, and Asian Development Bank forecasts suggest worsening economic trends for the region as a whole.³⁴

Rather than producing broad-based prosperity, a longtime U.S. goal, the Trump administration's approach appears to create discrete winners and losers. The administration's decision to pursue bilateral instead of multilateral trade agreements reinforces this perception. The agreements the administration has secured thus far have done little to provide a foundation for regionwide growth. The administration's most successful negotiations to date — those with Japan and South Korea — secured only moderate changes to the status quo. Meanwhile, its efforts to seek comprehensive deals with China and India both stalled, forcing the administration to settle for a narrow "Phase One" deal with the Chinese and the promise of further talks with India. The absence of a more credible

and robust economic strategy has only reinforced China's narrative that the United States lacks the capacity or will to restore the regional economic architecture it once built.

ASSESSING U.S. STRATEGY

The Trump administration's Indo-Pacific strategy offers important points of both continuity and change. First, it endorses, at least rhetorically, the enduring nature of America's interests in the Indo-Pacific region. Second, it openly acknowledges the need for a much more profound reckoning with the ways in which China's rise is reshaping the Indo-Pacific order.

Yet where the administration's implementation of its strategy misses the mark so drastically is its inability to reconcile these two ideas in practice. The administration's confrontational narrative and the markedly unilateral ambitions of its America First vision extend beyond China to U.S. allies and partners, which has unmoored American strategy from its grounding in the pursuit of shared interests. Similarly, the administration's inability to address the China challenge in a way that doesn't undermine long-standing tenets of American leadership — such as strengthening U.S. alliances, advancing economic openness, and supporting liberal values — has been deeply problematic.

Many Asian countries are looking for a back-up plan that depends less on either Washington or Beijing.

The inconsistencies between the administration's "free and open" narrative and its actions abound — in deploying tariffs on close partners, in the president's relatively muted support for democratic protesters in Hong Kong, and in berating close allies over host nation support for U.S. forces. These inconsistencies have undermined U.S. strategy on various fronts:

- *Fears about American reliability are fueling a search for additional strategic options.* Repeated polls have shown that the U.S. partners express a lack of trust in President Trump to "do the right thing" when it comes to global affairs.³⁵ This is fueling fears of both abandonment and entrapment among some U.S. allies. The result is not a rush to bandwagon with Beijing, but rather increasing discussions of additional options such as "strategic autonomy" or "middle-power diplomacy." In short, many Asian countries are looking for a back-up plan that depends less on either Washington or Beijing.
- *Zero-sum rhetoric complicates coalition-building efforts.* The perception that U.S. strategy is more focused on containing China than on providing collective goods has dampened enthusiasm for the Trump administration's Indo-Pacific strategy. Close partners such as South Korea and ASEAN have been reluctant to fully endorse the Free and Open Indo-Pacific concept or be seen as aligning too closely with FOIP-branded initiatives. The narrow and defensive posture of the administration's strategy also limits opportunities for America to shape a wider regional agenda and incentivize collective action on issues ranging from climate change to global health and education.
- *U.S. unilateralism reinforces Chinese efforts to reshape regional order.* Beijing has long decried U.S. security alliances and principles as Cold War relics ill-suited to the contemporary Asian security environment. It has instead called for a "new Asian security concept" more closely aligned with Beijing's preferences.³⁶ President Trump's frequent denigration of U.S. alliances and his willingness to undermine regional principles only reinforces Beijing's messaging, accelerating its efforts to weaken alliance networks and reshape a new Asian security architecture.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR TRILATERAL COORDINATION

The evident tensions between the Trump administration's free and open Indo-Pacific narrative and the president's focus on a competitive foreign policy are equally apparent in U.S. relationships with partners in Australia and ASEAN. On the one hand, the administration's desire to compete with Beijing has opened new avenues of cooperation between the United States and partners in Southeast Asia. Shared concerns about China's political and economic influence have deepened coordination between Canberra and Washington on issues ranging from 5G technologies to infrastructure and development assistance. Similarly, the Trump administration's renewed attention to Mekong region states has broadened U.S. engagement in Southeast Asia to a wider range of partners.

Yet at the same time, the Trump administration's approach has exposed new fault lines in these relationships. Even as the Australian government has pursued a tougher line toward Beijing, Australian policymakers and experts have also been candid that Canberra's interests and policies will not fully align with Washington's preferences.³⁷ ASEAN states have similarly published their own "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific" in an effort to stake out an independent voice on regional security dynamics.³⁸ President Trump's unwillingness to more fully consider his partners' interests — highlighted by a tense introductory phone call with former Australian leader Malcolm Turnbull as well as the president's repeated absence from U.S.-ASEAN leaders' meetings — only deepens these divides.

These fault lines undoubtedly create challenges for the U.S. policymakers and their counterparts, but they do not pose insurmountable obstacles to closer coordination. The shared values and interests between the United States and its partners continue to vastly outweigh any differences. Going forward, the three partners should identify opportunities

for closer coordination using a simple, three-part rubric: *exchange*, *coordinate*, *collaborate*. Under this approach, in areas where partners are likely to have misaligned interests or threat perceptions, they should focus on simple efforts to more transparently *exchange* information. In areas where there are elements of both agreement and disagreement, they should maximize commonalities by working to *coordinate* national-level initiatives. And finally, in areas where the partners have closely aligned interests, they should seek opportunities to *collaborate* on integrated policy initiatives.

A few examples of potential areas to for further trilateral engagement include:

- *Exchange candid assessments on China.* Washington and its partners are unlikely to fully reconcile their differences over how to approach Beijing in the near future. But this does not mean they should not engage in more open and candid exchanges about how each country is managing the areas of cooperation and competition in its relationship with China. This will become increasingly necessary as the domains of competition between Washington and Beijing grow. Washington needs to hear from its partners where their priorities may differ from its own, and why. Similarly, U.S. partners would benefit from a deeper understanding of U.S. policy, to help assuage combined concerns about abandonment and entrapment.
- *Coordinate on digital connectivity.* ASEAN has made it a priority to improve digital connectivity within Southeast Asia. The United States and Australia are both partners in this effort, and both countries participate in ASEAN's Smart Cities initiatives. While there may be differences between various countries regarding their preferred digital standards and norms, there are nonetheless opportunities for greater coordination. The United States and Australia could discuss

with individual Southeast Asian states how to better align the assistance they provide through their Smart City initiatives and coordinate cyber capacity-building training and activities. As countries continue to debate international standards in the cyber and digital domains, ASEAN, Australia, and the United States might also consider a trilateral dialogue to discuss digital governance issues such as data privacy and cyber sovereignty.

- *Collaborate on Mekong region development assistance.* The United States, Australia, and ASEAN are all engaging in the Mekong through different dialogue mechanisms. This proliferation of dialogues presents a coordination challenge for riparian states. All of the parties share an interest in facilitating more sustainable and transparent resource management that will prevent instability and poverty in Southeast Asia. Policymakers could explore opportunities to develop collaborative approaches by sharing country-level needs assessments, establishing trilateral development projects, and endorsing similar resource-management principles and standards.

CONCLUSION

In spite of early concerns that the Trump administration might walk away from the U.S. pivot to Asia, his administration's Indo-Pacific strategy confirms Asia's important place in American foreign policy. On some fronts, such as efforts to enhance ties with strong democratic partners like Japan and India, the administration's strategy reaffirms

consistent, bipartisan priorities that have guided American engagement in Asia for decades. On others — principally, the administration's approach toward China and international trade — the Trump administration's approach is frequently dissonant with the positive-sum ambitions of its Indo-Pacific vision.

The principal weakness of the administration's approach on both of these issues is that by attempting to marry strategic competition with the nationalism of the president's America First vision, it has muddied the waters of U.S. strategy. The president's threat-centric, protectionist rhetoric implicitly suggests the United States has walked away from what has made American leadership so distinct: its emphasis on promoting collective goods rather than pursuing narrow, unilateral aims.

The administration's rhetoric has complicated efforts to build closer coordination with close U.S. partners in the region, creating unnecessary areas of friction in its relationships with close partners such as Australia and ASEAN. This approach only expands the opportunities for Beijing to exploit gaps between the U.S. and its allies and weaken regional security networks. Going forward, the United States and its partners should not shy away from a frank acknowledgement of areas of disagreement, but they must also work more aggressively to prevent these disagreements from undermining their collective interests. The United States, Australia, and ASEAN are aligned in a shared vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific. By focusing on the opportunities to build collective action in pursuit of this goal, they can maintain a positive agenda for multilateral cooperation.

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