

The US Indo-Pacific Strategy and China's Response

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Abstract

The US-China relationship defines geopolitics in the 21st century. Despite a messy start, the Trump administration was able to provide a new national security strategy within the first year in office. The new US national security strategy clearly defines China as a strategic rival that “challenges American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity.” For the first time, the United States outlined an Indo-Pacific strategy to compete with and contain China’s rising power and influence among those countries along the Indian and Pacific oceans. As part of an overall competitive strategy vis-à-vis China, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo called for “a new alliance of democracies” against China in the international community. The Chinese government has yet to officially respond to the US Indo-Pacific strategy as well as the “free and open Indo-Pacific” concept. Ten years ago, when the Obama administration rolled out the “pivot to Asia” strategy, Beijing’s answer was a grand geoeconomic plan to expand Chinese economic power along the ancient Silk Roads on land and sea. Ten years later, how will Beijing respond to the new strategic challenge from Washington? In this article, the authors argue that Beijing has not taken tit-for-tat action to respond to the US Indo-Pacific Strategy. Instead, China has responded to the new American challenge in a more constructive, peaceful, and

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nonconfrontational manner. Beijing's objective is to mitigate possible national security risks while continuing to extend its international influence in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond.

President Donald Trump unveiled a new US vision for a “free and open Indo-Pacific region” during his 12-day visit to Asia in November 2017.¹ In the following month, the Trump administration published a new US national security strategy report, in which China is defined as a strategic rival that threatens US national security in the Indo-Pacific region. The report also outlined an Indo-Pacific strategy (IPS) for the United States and areas for priority actions on countering China's rising influence in both the Indian Ocean and the Pacific.² By echoing Japan's “free and open Indo-Pacific framework” and India's Go-East policy, the release of the US IPS has reactivated the regional security debate in Asia. It has given currency to the ongoing debate over how China's BRI activities and renewed major power competition are shaping the regional order. Following Beijing's enacting a new national security law for Hong Kong in June 2020, Washington took the opportunity to further strengthen the international alliance against China in the region.³

The Chinese government has yet to issue any formal response to the concept of the “free and open Indo-Pacific” and the US IPS. There is no doubt that the pressure and challenge brought up by the new US IPS are huge. Many Chinese international relations (IR) scholars are becoming concerned about the negative impacts created by the new US strategy on China's IR and China-US relations. Many research reports and articles have been published on this topic. Yet most of these publications are policy analyses, and very few provide a good conceptual framework for analyzing China's strategic response to the US IPS. In this article we take stock and classify these analyses into different groups. We enlighten our readers on the best ways to interpret China's response to the US IPS and how that would affect the China-US strategic competition in the foreseeable future.

1. The “Free and Open Indo-Pacific”: From Concept to Strategy

The concept of “Indo-Pacific,” like “Asia-Pacific,” is a geostrategic construct. Geographically, the Indo-Pacific refers to a large maritime region of warm water connecting the Indian and Pacific oceans.

Strategically speaking, it has profound geopolitical connotations. It emphasizes the “security linkage” between the Indian and Pacific oceans and implies a two-ocean strategy of treating the Indo-Pacific as a single theater of operation or strategic space. In some sense it highlights the prospects of future major power competition being playing out more in this broader maritime area than on the continent. Moreover, the concept alludes to India’s strategic importance in the region and elevates its role in the global geostrategic equation when “Indo” is added to the Pacific.

The original proposal of the “Indo-Pacific” as a strategic region was not an American initiative. Well before the Indo-Pacific became part of the US government’s vocabulary, Japanese, Indian, and Australian policy-makers already started discussing the concept and advocating it to other countries in the region. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was one of the first politicians to propose the “Indo-Pacific” concept. In 2006, then the Chief Cabinet Secretary of Japan, Abe put forward an initiative in his book *Towards a Beautiful Country: My Vision for Japan*. He envisioned an alliance of four countries—the United States, Japan, Australia, and India—in the Indo-Pacific. In his view the alliance could enhance Japan’s international status and advocate the values of liberal democracy.⁴ After Abe became Prime Minister, he delivered a speech titled “Confluence of the Two Seas” to the Indian Parliament during his visit to New Delhi in August 2007. In the speech, he argued establishing a “broader Asia” partnership with India through the “dynamic coupling” as seas of freedom and of prosperity. On this basis, he elaborated the concept of “the Pacific and the Indian Oceans as the confluence of the two seas.”⁵ Later on, Japanese officials actively promoted the idea and tried to persuade the United States, India, and Australia to form a strategic dialogue mechanism. Yet Prime Minister Kevin Rudd of Australia and Manmohan Singh of India were not so enthusiastic about this initiative at the time.

From 2010 onward, the term “Indo-Pacific” began to acquire salience among the Indian and Australian policy communities. It was frequently used by strategic analysts and high-level government officials. The Indo-Pacific idea picked up steam when Abe was elected Japanese Prime Minister for the second time in 2012 and Sino-Japanese relations hit a new low because of the tension over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands dispute. When he visited the United States in 2012, he gave a speech using the term “Indo-Pacific” and called on Australia, India, Japan, and the United States to form a “Democratic Security Diamond” to compete with China.⁶

In August 2016, Abe announced the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy” at the Tokyo International Conference on African Development held in Kenya. At the core of the strategy is “freedom of navigation and the rule of law” to ensure that these waters are a public good that brings peace and prosperity to all people without discrimination into the future.⁷ During his visit to the United States in February 2017, Prime Minister Abe tried to persuade President Trump to accept this term.

The concept of “Indo-Pacific” appeared in official Indian and Australian documents in 2013. India has long had national ambitions to increase its influence in international affairs. Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh adopted the phrase “a stable, secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific region” to highlight and justify India’s relations with ASEAN and Japan as well as political-economic ties with the United States.⁸ To strategically “relocate” Australia in the region, an Australia Defence White Paper, issued in May 2013, used the concept of “Indo-Pacific” to advocate “close policy dialogue with Japan” and “closer trilateral cooperation” with Japan and the United States, stating that “Australia and India are also important trade partners and share a commitment to democracy, freedom of navigation and a global order governed by international law.”⁹

Yet for the United States, the “Indo-Pacific” concept had more normative connotations in the beginning than concrete security implications. It did not become an integral part of a wider foreign and security strategy toward Asia (including East, Southeast, and South Asia) and the Pacific until its strategic focus of competing with China became clear. The American strategists have long noticed the importance of the Indian Ocean and treating the Indian and the Pacific as a whole for the US global strategy. There are several reasons for Washington to extend an Asia-Pacific strategic perspective to an Indo-Pacific view. First, the Indian Ocean has become strategically more important as it surpasses the Atlantic and Pacific oceans for being the busiest trade channel in the world. Ensuring the security of the waterways from the Red Sea to the Strait of Hormuz and the Strait of Malacca is of vital strategic interest to the United States as well as all Asia-Pacific states. Second, expected to be the world’s most populous country in the next decade, India is rising fast to become the world’s third largest economy and a more important geopolitical player on the world stage. Third, the rise of China has become the biggest geopolitical challenge for the United States in the 21st century.

The use of the “Indo-Pacific” term in the US official documents reflects the growing significance of India in the US Asia policy and

American interests in the Indian Ocean. Beginning with the George W. Bush administration, Washington began to pay more attention to its relations with India. President Bush visited India in March 2006 and signed the US-Indian civil nuclear agreement. During the Obama administration, President Obama visited India twice, in 2010 and 2015. Although the “Indo-Pacific” term was not explicitly used by the Obama administration, the Pentagon’s Quadrennial Defense Review 2010 put “securing sea lanes of communication for freedom of navigation, global commerce and international energy security” as strategic interests of the United States in the Pacific and Indian oceans. In 2010, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton delivered a speech titled “U.S. Involvement in Asia-Pacific” in Hawaii, using the concept of “the Indo-Pacific basin.”¹⁰ In 2011, she published an article in *Foreign Policy*, emphasizing the importance of the Indo-Pacific region to US strategy. She pointed out, “Stretching from the Indian subcontinent to the western shores of the Americas, the region spans two oceans—the Pacific and the Indian—that are increasingly linked by shipping and strategy.”¹¹ In July 2013, Vice President Joseph Biden visited India and Singapore. During the trip, he declared that the United States considered the Indo-Pacific region as an integral part of the future of Asia. Although Obama’s national security strategy report did not adopt the phrase “Indo-Pacific,” it includes India in the Asia-Pacific region, emphasizing the need to continue to strengthen its strategic and economic partnership with India.¹²

During Obama’s tenure, Washington’s focus of foreign policy was the “pivot to Asia” or “rebalancing” to the Asia-Pacific. The Indian Ocean was not explicitly mentioned, but it was implicitly included in the concept of the Asia-Pacific. A new trilateral dialogue framework between the United States, Japan, and India was initiated during the first term of the Obama administration and was finally launched in 2015 by Secretary of State John Kerry in Obama’s second term. The Obama administration did not clearly define what role India could play in the “rebalancing” strategy, but the visible progress in the quadrilateral cooperation among the United States, Japan, India, and Australia during Obama’s time was a clear indication that India and the Indian Ocean are included in the US Asia strategy and are part of the US rebalancing to Asia.

It would not be unfair to say President Donald Trump’s IPS is nothing new but a continuation of Obama’s rebalancing to Asia by another name. When Trump came to office in January 2017, he was looking for a new phrase in Asian policy to distinguish his foreign policy from that of

Obama's "rebalancing to Asia." Susan Thornton, then acting Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian Affairs, made it clear in March 2017 that "the 'Pivot' to Asia is over."¹³ But in the early months of the Trump administration there was no clear strategic vision on how to formulate a new Asia strategy. Trump is a businessman-turn-politician. He is a more pragmatic and issue-oriented president. He put more emphasis on issues like the North Korean nuclear issue and the US trade imbalance. Trump's "America first" thinking emphasizes the priority of "American interests and national security" in foreign policy. That has largely transformed the purpose, rationale, and operation of US foreign policy that has been carried out by previous administrations. While Trump takes a transactional approach to foreign affairs, key members of his foreign policy and national security team follow a more traditional approach in conducting US diplomacy and foreign policy formulation. After a little more than a half year in office, the Trump administration began to articulate a relatively clear "Indo-Pacific" strategy. In September and October 2017, Secretary of Defense James Mattis and Rex Tillerson visited India successively. Their visits showed the great importance Washington attaches to India. In September 2017, for the first time New Delhi invited Canberra to participate in the Exercise Malabar. This was the first time that the United States, Japan, India, and Australia held military exercises together, marking important progress in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad).

On 18 October 2017, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson presented a vision of the US Indo-Pacific strategy in a speech titled "Defining Our Relationship with India for the Next Century" at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, D.C. For the first time, as he pointed out, "the Indo-Pacific, including the entire Indian Ocean, the Western Pacific and the nations that surround them, will be the most consequential part of the globe in the 21st century."¹⁴ During his visit to India, he further elaborated the Indo-Pacific idea. That same month, Mattis told the Senate Armed Services Committee during a congressional hearing that in "a globalized world, there are many belts and many roads, and no one nation should put itself into a position of dictating 'One Belt, One Road,'" a clear reference to the Chinese BRI.¹⁵

President Trump made a speech on the American vision for "a free and open Indo-Pacific" at the APEC Summit on 10 November 2017 in Vietnam. In the speech he outlined that the "Indo-Pacific" is a place where countries, with diverse cultures and many different dreams, can "all prosper side-by-side, and thrive in freedom and in peace."¹⁶ The new US

Indo-Pacific vision was an attempt to link to India's "Look East" policy adopted since 1992 and Japan's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" strategy promoted by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. During the 31st ASEAN Summit in Manila in 2017, officials of the United States, Japan, India, and Australia restarted the Quad that had been suspended for 10 years. In December 2017, H. R. McMaster, Trump's National Security Advisor, stated that the new vision for Indo-Pacific imagines "a community of nations that are strong, independent, and thriving"—and "a future of many dreams for the people of the region."¹⁷ It is thus clear that the "Indo-Pacific" as a geopolitical concept has gained currency among regional countries in recent years. At the end of 2017 the Trump administration began to officially incorporate it into its national security strategy.

2. What's in the US Indo-Pacific Strategy?

Despite a messy start, the Trump administration was one of the few administrations that could provide a national security strategy report within its first year in office. Trump's "National Security Strategy of the United States of America," released on 18 December 2017, is well within the bipartisan mainstream of American foreign policy. The national security strategy clearly defines China as a strategic rival that "challenges American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity." For the first time, the strategy report has a section on the "Indo-Pacific" region. The theme of the US IPS, as the report states, is a "geopolitical competition between free and repressive visions of world order." In this region, China challenges the United States through economic inducements and penalties, influence operations, and implied military threats to other states to heed its political and security agenda. Therefore, the US IPS is about how to sustain US leadership to uphold a regional order respectful of sovereignty and independence.¹⁸

As a great power, America's strategic thinking has always been influenced by geopolitics and big power competition. The thinking of geostrategists like Alfred Mahan, Halford Mackinder, and Nicholas Spykman led the United States to the containment strategy regarding the Soviet Union and China after World War II and now with the rise of China in the post-Cold War era. Throughout history the challenge posed by China's rise and fall largely took place on land, not the sea. China was viewed as a land power rather than a maritime power, trying to dominate the Eurasian landmass. Yet since the beginning of the 21st century, the

China challenge for the United States has come from both the land and the sea. China's BRI has considerably enlarged the scope of the China-US global competition. Beijing is advancing its interests and influence on land and at sea across the world. To Washington, this requires following Beijing's BRI from the land to the sea to maintain the American strategic advantage over China. Although Beijing has repeatedly declared that the BRI has nothing to do with geopolitics and that it has no intention to challenge the postwar world order dominated by the West, geopolitical competition has been a key concern for Washington to develop an effective, relatively low-cost strategy to stop or delay China's rise.

In 2001 President George W. Bush regarded China as the major "strategic competitor" of the United States when he took office. But the September 11 attacks left the United States in the mire of the "war on terror" in Iraq and Afghanistan, making it impossible for the United States to deploy adequate military resources to balance against China. When Obama came to office, he realized that the United States had spent immense resources on the "war on terror." He tried to move away from the two wars and reinvest resources to restore the US global leadership and secure American interests elsewhere. Obama's rebalance to Asia was a step in that direction with hedging against the rising China in mind. The "pivot to Asia" was a comprehensive, multidimensional strategy built on four pillars: strengthening alliances; deepening partnerships with emerging powers; building a stable, productive, and constructive relationship with China; and empowering regional institutions.¹⁹ Yet the pivot did not mobilize adequate means for its ends. The relative decline of US power in Asia has made the postwar "hub and spoke" system insufficient to maintain US security and interests in the Asia-Pacific region. The rapid rise of Chinese military power has made it impossible for Washington to effectively keep the PLA navy at bay in the first island chain. The Chinese navy and power projection have gone far beyond the first island chain and well into the Indian Ocean. The changing balance of power between the two countries has prompted a new round of the China debate in the United States.

One of the big differences between Trump's IPS and Obama's pivot to Asia is that Trump's strategy explicitly targets China while Obama's rebalancing strategy did not. President Obama openly declared that "we welcome China's rise" and "we have more to fear from a weak China than from a strong one."²⁰ Tom Donilon, Obama's National Security Advisor, made it clear that Obama's pivot "does not mean containing China or seeking to dictate terms to Asia. And it isn't just a matter of our

military presence. It is an effort that harnesses all elements of U.S. power—military, political, trade and investment, development and our values.”²¹ For the Trump administration, the Pentagon’s 2018 “United States National Defense Strategy” clearly states that strategic competitions with China and Russia are the principal priorities for the Department of Defense “because of the magnitude of the threats they pose to U.S. security and prosperity today, and the potential for those threats to increase in the future.” For this purpose, the Pentagon aims to strengthen its alliances and partnerships in the Indo-Pacific “to a networked security architecture capable of deterring aggression, maintaining stability, and ensuring free access to common domains.”²² In January 2018, when Daniel Rosenblum, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, made a speech titled “The United States and the Indo-Pacific Region,” the idea of an IPS targeting began to emerge within the US policy circle.²³ On 2 April 2018, Alex Wong, Deputy Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, gave a more detailed briefing on the meaning and implications of the US “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy.”²⁴ In May 2018, the US Pacific Command was renamed the Indo-Pacific Command. In June 2018, Secretary of Defense James Mattis gave a detailed account of the IPS at the Shangri-La Security Dialogue. He reiterated Washington’s commitment to US allies and partners.²⁵ On 30 July of the same year, at the Indo-Pacific Business Forum hosted by the US Chamber of Commerce, Secretary of State Michael Pompeo emphasized the importance of IPS to the United States. In the speech, he explained that “open” means peaceful resolution of territorial and maritime disputes, fair and reciprocal trade, open investment environments, transparent agreements between nations, and improved connectivity to drive regional ties.²⁶

Entering 2019, the rationale and policy measures under the US IPS became more pronounced. On 1 June 2019, the Pentagon issued the “Indo-Pacific Strategy Report,” which spells out in more detail IPS rationales and specific policies. Using very straightforward language, the report states that “inter-state strategic competition, defined by geopolitical rivalry between free and repressive world order visions, is the primary concern for U.S. national security. In particular, the People’s Republic of China, under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, seeks to reorder the region to its advantage by leveraging military modernization, influence operations, and predatory economics to coerce other nations.”²⁷ Specifically, the report calls for a series of measures to

strengthen relations with allies and maintain the US-led maritime order in the region. On 4 November 2019, the State Department released “A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision.” This report, focused more on the political vision of the regional order, argues that “free, fair, and reciprocal trade, open investment environments, good governance, and freedom of the seas are goals shared by all who wish to prosper in a free and open future.”²⁸

The priority actions for the US IPS are classified in political, economic, and military/security areas, according to the US national security strategy. At present, IPS military and security actions seem to be more visible than those in other areas for the Trump administration. In the economic area, the Trump administration’s policy is still vague, except for waging a war on tariffs with China and other regional countries. A large increase in the defense budget and the revival of the Quad, which was suspended for 10 years, are important developments for the IPS. The Quad is regarded as a pillar of the future US regional security strategy. US-led bilateral security relations are also picking up, as the Pentagon works hard to strengthen the trilateral security dialogues, such as the US-Japan-ROK, the US-Japan-Australia, and the US-India-Australia. The bilateral security dialogues include those with Indonesia, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore and Vietnam, South Korea, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, and Taiwan.

Washington also looks to the Five Eyes framework to build an anti-China coalition. Beijing’s newly enacted Hong Kong national security law gave new impetus for Washington to move forward the Five Eyes link with IPS. Upon China’s implementation of the Hong Kong national security law, London announced it would work closely with the United States, Australia and Japan in the Indo-Pacific and deploy the Queen Elizabeth aircraft carrier in the South China Sea, a symbolic move to demonstrate solidarity with its Western allies.²⁹ There is rising call for Five Eyes become Six Eyes in Japan, as Tokyo considers itself a natural partner for the U.S.-Japan alliance to encircle China.³⁰ Australia Prime Minister Scott Morrison said that building an Indo-Pacific alliance will be a “critical priority” for his government.³¹

3. The Indo-Pacific Strategy and US-China Competition

The main objective of the US IPS is to provide strategic alternatives to undermine China’s growing influence, via BRI or other means, among

those countries along the Indian and Pacific oceans. In response to shared or similar concerns regarding China by Japan, Australia, and, to some extent, India, the IPS is also intended to consolidate the American network of allies and partnerships in the region to countervail China's increasing military presence in the Indo-Pacific. In this sense, the Trump administration's IPS has become a new driving force transforming the present regional political, security, and military environment. Although the US IPS still has problems of ambiguity and lacks operational details, it has already generated new debate across the region and new strategic narratives are emerging. As the momentum of the Quad has been restored, big power rivalries have returned to regional politics. ASEAN is looking for ways to keep its "centrality" in regional institution building and regional security dialogues. For ASEAN, it would be ideal for regional states to integrate the US IPS and China's BRI for maximum economic benefits and minimum security risk. It can be anticipated that future geostrategic competition among regional powers, the US IPS, China's BRI, and the Quad will correlate with other regional initiatives, and they will be defining factors that will shape the future regional security environment. Among these factors, how the US-China strategic competition will play out and how US-China relations will evolve will be critical for regional IR.

The US-China relationship defines geopolitics in the 21st century. The ongoing trade war and the present coronavirus crisis have pushed US-China relations to their lowest point since the end of the Cold War. On top of this, the US IPS came out at a time when the American debate over its China policy, begun in the second term of the Obama administration, has come to a broad consensus—calling for an overhaul of the US-China relationship and the US China policy. Trump's China policy has displayed more change than continuity from those of his predecessors. There is growing bipartisan pressure on Trump to be tough on China and redirect the course of the US-China relationship.³² The Obama administration adopted a more multilateral policy toward economic issues, reflected in its Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) initiative and attracting China to cooperate with the United States on climate change and other global governance issues, while handling security issues in bilateral approaches. The Trump administration, to the contrary, has adopted bilateral policies on economic issues, exerting unprecedented pressure on almost all trading partners including allies and forcing them to sign bilateral trade agreements with the United States. President

Trump has been resolved to fight a protracted trade war against China. Trump himself does not seem to be very interested in multilateralism and having a US regional strategy for Asia, but his foreign policy and national security team is very keen to pursue a coordinated regional strategy vis-à-vis China. As put in the US national security strategy, the United States will “redouble our commitment to established alliances and partnerships, while expanding and deepening relationships with new partners.”³³ The Pentagon is actively promoting the transformation of the bilateral alliance system into an Asian version of NATO. The revival of the Quad is considered a key lever against China in the Indo-Pacific region.

Different from Obama’s pivot to Asia, the Trump administration has adopted a tit-for-tat strategy to respond to China’s BRI challenge. The Trump administration believes that China’s BRI is using an ambitious geoeconomic endeavor to project its strategic influence across the Eurasian continent, from the Pacific to the Indian Ocean, and all the way up to Africa. If successful, China will host most of the world’s economic centers and control major trading routes and access to natural resources around the globe. The United States still possesses enormous levers such as military supremacy, multiple alliances, powerful Western-led international organizations, and soft power to balance the China challenge. Different from the US containment strategy against the Soviet Union during the Cold War, the IPS is trying to contain China in those places where the United States has vital strategic interest and can work with its allies to build a chain that traverses the Western Pacific and East Indian oceans to encircle China from different directions. One of the key IPS strategic goals is to stop Beijing from challenging Washington’s sea power in the Indo-Pacific. In other words, Washington is trying to cut off Beijing’s “maritime silk road” so that Beijing can expand only through the “economic belt” on land. A Chinese scholar argues that in this way Washington can increase potential risks for China because countries along the “belt,” such as those in Central Asia, West Asia, and North Africa, are economically poor and politically turbulent, while those along the “road” are relatively economically rich and politically stable.³⁴ If Beijing cannot get enough resources from wealthy countries to support its expansion in the poor areas, it may eventually lead to a severe over-draft of China’s capabilities.

One of the key elements of the Trump administration’s competitive strategy is to increase efforts to bring India to its side against China. It is a troubling sign for China given the profound problems and a complicated

relationship between the two Asian giants. Washington has used all its efforts to lobby India to its side or to transform India to become a part of the Western alliance before. What is alarming for Beijing is India has become a key component of the US IPS. Between India and China, there is no easy way to solve territorial disputes over 100,000 square kilometers on the border and the geopolitical rivalry between the two rising powers. The danger of conflict is always there and could erupt anytime. Behind the border disputes is strong nationalistic sentiments on both sides. In May and June 2020, Chinese and Indian troops clashed at Pangong Tso and Galwan River valley on the border, that led to the death of more than 20 Indian soldiers and an unknown number of Chinese casualties. After the border incidents, the United States and Australia publicly announced their support to India, a move different from what they did during the Sino-Indian border incident in 2017.

For India, New Delhi's embrace of the IPS would enable the country to obtain a huge strategic advantage over China. It would help to improve India's international status and obtain advanced weapons and technologies from the United States and Japan. To some extent, it could increase its bargaining chips in the competition with China. Some observers believe that if Beijing tries to take a tough approach against New Delhi in the event of a conflict between the two, it could be held back by Washington. If Beijing tries to compromise with India, New Delhi could rely on the Quad to further blackmail Beijing.³⁵ For Washington, India is a major sea power in the Indian Ocean. It can help the United States to balance China's expansion in the Indian Ocean and reduce the US burden in maintaining the security linkage between the Indian and Pacific oceans and carrying out a two-ocean strategy in the region. In this way, Washington can deploy more strategic resources in the Western Pacific to counter China's growing presence.

Another card the Trump administration is playing with China is Taiwan. The Taiwan issue is an old problem in the Sino-US relationship. It is now reemerging as a new political irritant for Beijing. The uncertainty and stakes brought up by playing the Taiwan card could be devastating for the future relationship. The Trump administration's increasing support for Taiwan is ringing the bell on Beijing. The magnitude and scope of Washington's support for Taiwan under the Trump administration have surpassed those of previous US administrations. Trump has a markedly different view of Taiwan from his subordinates and aides, although they are trying to increase support for Taiwan. Trump wants to

use the Taiwan issue as a weight to pressure Beijing for concessions on economic and trade issues. His subordinates and aids think about this issue more from a strategic perspective. Moreover, lawmakers on Capitol Hill have joined the play. They have initiated Taiwan-related bills that call on the executive branch to pressure those countries that have diplomatic relations with Taiwan not to sever diplomatic relations with Taiwan. The frequency with which American warships pass through the Taiwan Strait has increased significantly since 2018. The Taiwan issue is now increasingly viewed in linkage with the legitimacy of the Communist Party of China (CPC). Lawmakers as well as policymakers in the administration consider that Washington's strengthening of its strategic relationship with Taiwan can threaten the CPC's rule. If Beijing is deemed incapable of achieving China's reunification, it will be met with resentment and harsh criticism from the Chinese public. The Trump administration kept pushing the envelope on Taiwan. It authorized \$180 million arms sale to Taiwan in May 2020. US Congress has passed and introduced five pro-Taiwan bills since February 2018. On 9 August 2020, US Secretary of Health and Human Services Alex Azar visited Taipei, the highest ranking US official who has visited Taiwan in 40 years.³⁶ Similar to the Taiwan, Hong Kong has increasingly become an irritant for China-US relations. The start of Hong Kong's anti-extradition bill protests in June 2019 provided Washington new leverage to check on Beijing. Hong Kong's protest movement and Beijing's new national security law in Hong Kong have made the city a focal point of political wrestling between Washington and Beijing. The Trump administration's sanctions on Beijing for its new security law and its alignment with Canberra, Tokyo, London, and EU countries will further worsen China-US relations.

On the South China Sea issue, the Trump administration seems more determined to use all means necessary to effectively curb the expansion of China's military power. The US military launched a "freedom of navigation operation" four times in the South China Sea in 2017, five times in 2018, and nine times in 2019. The Pentagon announced that China would no longer be invited to the annual "Rim of the Pacific" military exercise as of 2018. The US military has increased the frequency of joint military exercises with countries that have territorial disputes with China in recent years. Australia also increased military pressure on China in the South China Sea during Malcolm Turnbull's tenure as prime minister. In April 2018, China and Australia's navies confronted each other in the

South China Sea for the first time. The South China Sea is considered the most likely area where conflict could happen between the United States and China.³⁷

To push back Beijing's efforts to promote its political and economic model to the rest of the world, Washington is more proactive to fight an ideological war against China. This could be a new front for the Sino-US rivalry under the IPS. The US national security strategy labels the US-China rivalry as "a geopolitical competition between free and repressive visions of world order." For decades, American elites have believed that the United States could transform China into a free and democratic country through moderate "engagement." However, they have become increasingly disappointed with China in recent years. Instead of embracing the values of freedom and democracy, China has constantly used liberal international institutions to make itself stronger and appeal to other countries. From Obama's second term, Washington adopted a hedging policy with clear characteristics of realism on China. Senior officials in the Trump administration have inherited Obama administration policies in an attempt to increase pressure on China. It seems that senior officials like Secretary of State Michael Pompeo no longer think that the United States can change China's behavior and its political system through engagement policies. Instead, they believe Washington must take a harsh stance on China and isolate it internationally. They have begun to make extremely unfriendly remarks toward Beijing and to alienate the relationship between the Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese people. As part of an overall strategy, Washington has made efforts to force the countries in the Indo-Pacific region to take sides between China and the United States on political, economic, security, and even technological issues.

4. How Is the Indo-Pacific Strategy Perceived in China?

Since the Trump administration rolled out its "free and open Indo-Pacific" strategy in 2017, Beijing has not made any formal response to it. Rather than raising alarms as they did over the original Quad a decade ago, the Chinese official comments on the US IPS have been restrained and cautious.³⁸ When asked on whether the IPS and the Quad were meant to contain China in the region, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi (王毅) used the "sea foam" analogy to elaborate his view on the issue.³⁹

It seems there is never a shortage of headline-grabbing ideas. They are like the sea foam in the Pacific or Indian Ocean. They may get some attention, but soon will dissipate. Contrary to the claim made by some academics and media outlets that the 'Indo-Pacific Strategy' aims to contain China, the four countries' official position is that it targets no one. I hope they mean what they say, and that their actions will match their rhetoric. Nowadays, stoking a new Cold War is out of sync with the times and inciting block confrontation will find no market.

Wang Yi's remarks contain subtle messages regarding the Chinese attitude toward the Indo-Pacific concept and the IPS. First, Wang did not brush aside the challenge brought up by the IPS. He acknowledged there are claims that the IPS targets at China, but he challenged if the Quad governments can openly state their target is China. He fully understands that New Delhi, Canberra, and Tokyo would not explicitly state that their "free and open Indo-Pacific" is targeting China. Second, despite the emerging China threat narrative brought up by Washington, Beijing still believes that regional states should focus on East Asia and existing Asian cooperation mechanisms and achievements in the region, not distracted by the Indo-Pacific initiative. Regional states, as he remarked in a China-ASEAN function, should focus on cooperation and consensus building without engaging in confrontational games or forming factions or small cliques.⁴⁰ Another important message in Wang's speech is that the US Indo-Pacific initiative could be something like the "sea foam" that comes and goes. This reminds people to think whether the new US initiative would be enduring or something like Obama's "pivot to Asia."⁴¹ To the Chinese, Trump's IPS still lacks clarity and impetus necessary to become an enduring strategy concept for the region and its prospects are far from certain.

Beijing's cautious and sometimes dismissive response includes both pessimistic and optimistic assessments. On the pessimistic side, we find there is an increasingly pessimistic assessment of the Trump administration's China policy and IPS within the Chinese policy community. More and more Chinese government officials and scholars have begun to discuss the Washington pressure in playing a more competitive game with China, a much tougher and more malicious game than Obama's "pivot to Asia." By the IPS, the Trump administration seems determined to engage in an overall confrontation with China and to mobilize its allies and like-minded countries to countervail China's rising influence in the region and in all aspects of international competition. Unlike Obama's

rebalancing to Asia, the Trump administration and elites in Washington have gone beyond any doubt to conclude China is the primary threat to future American national security, and Beijing is using all means, including BRI and technological warfare such as the Huawei 5G network, to undercut American power across the world, and Washington must use all means to push back. In almost all Chinese research publications, we can find the consensus that the Americans have crossed the line and the China-US relationship will never go back to the “good old days.” As the Chinese people are advised to be prepared for the return of major power competition, the popular sentiment in the country is also changing. Anti-American commentaries in *Global Times* (環球時報 Huanqiu shibao) are getting more applause. In an interview in the *Financial Times* concerning Washington's effort to revitalize its alliance system to contain China's rising influence and BRI projects, Chinese Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Le Yucheng (樂玉成) stated, “China welcomes regional initiatives, but we are firmly against any attempts to use the Indo-Pacific strategy as a tool to counter the BRI or even contain China.”⁴²

Over past two years there has been a downward spiral of deteriorated mutual perceptions and tension between China and the United States. As the tension between the two countries, caused by economic and political disputes, keeps rising, the mutual negative perception is getting reinforced. Many American political elites share a narrative that Washington's long-standing policy of “engagement” toward China has failed and the United States needs to get tough on China. This disillusionment provides the basis for a bipartisan consensus of “getting tough on China.” Meanwhile in China, elites have come to an interpretation that the United States is returning to a containment policy toward China. The Trump administration's national security strategy, the Pentagon's National Defense Strategy, and the Nuclear Posture Review all collectively point to China as the primary strategic competitor to the United States. So the IPS is part of this national competitive strategy against China. This perception loop reinforces itself across the Pacific Ocean. The Chinese understand that Washington will use all possible means to impede the rise of China in the region. China's BRI and its relations with regional states, such as Japan, Australia, and India as well as littoral countries within the Indian Ocean, will be adversely affected. The US military is likely to deepen its involvement in the South China Sea through the IPS.

However, the present IPS also gives Beijing some reasons for a less pessimistic assessment. The “free and open Indo-Pacific” as it stands now

still lacks clarity and has problems in its feasibility and future implementation. This leads some Chinese analysts to argue that the IPS may have only limited impacts on China.⁴³ There are both internal and external constraints that will impede its implementation. Internally, the financial difficulty and personnel changes of the Trump administration constitute obstacles to the complete implementation of the IPS. In the Chinese view, Trump should be distinguished from his administration in assessing US foreign policy. The administration's national security strategy and foreign policy are not dictated by Trump but are the product of combining Trump's thinking and that of the mainstream American political elites, represented by the high-ranking executives and professional officers working in the Trump administration. Mainstream American political elites have become more negative toward China since Obama's second term. They advocate a "getting tough on China" policy, which has bipartisan support within the Beltway. However, Trump may not necessarily favor a tough stance on China. Besides caring about his reelection, his policy focus is favorable toward trade and does not have big-picture ideas about a coherent regional and global strategy. He has waged a tough trade war on China as well as other US trading partners. Trump's trade war has hurt China but cannot stop the Chinese from expanding their influence through BRI. Trump's irresponsible attitude toward international institutions, contempt for allies, and neglect of human rights have all benefited China. Yet when high-ranking executives and professionals in the Trump administration formulate US foreign policy, they seem to care more about the US "national interest," not just President Trump's personal preferences. One Chinese scholar observes that Trump himself is not really interested in the IPS; rather, executives and professionals in the administration are more keen to put the Indo-Pacific policy in place for President Trump.⁴⁴ They may be secretly fighting against Trump policy agendas to save national interests. Trump's focus is on a few selected issues like trade and the North Korean nuclear problem. An analyst at RAND said that continued domestic political conflict, deep social polarization, and fracturing alliances threaten to mire the United States in gridlock and infighting.⁴⁵ Many capable and knowledgeable executives and experts in the Trump administration have left office. While those officials who remain in office are tough on China or have written alarmist reports, they are not strategists at all and do not truly know how to effectively deter China. As Rush Doshi observes, the IPS has hardly been implemented seriously by Trump himself, and Trump

and his present administration continually send conflicting signals to the outside world.⁴⁶

There are external constraints as well. The United States and its partners, especially India, may have different policy preferences when it comes to the IPS interpretation and implementation. Smaller countries like ASEAN members have remained reluctant to take sides between the United States and China. The implementation of the “free and open Indo-Pacific” objective requires leadership. Can Washington lead and unite the region for this common course? Trump has vowed to “make America great again,” and his “America first” policy is often at odds with regional states and multilateral institutions. “My job is not to represent the world,” he declared. He resolutely withdrew from various international regimes, such as the Paris Climate Change Accord and UNESCO, to put “America first” into practice.⁴⁷ Trump himself has little interest in consolidating relationships with allies, instead demanding that countries such as Japan and South Korea have a bigger share of military spending. He has pressured them regarding trade.⁴⁸ Nor is he interested in America’s leadership in Asia, having been absent from ASEAN summits twice and from the APEC summit once.

Trump’s apathy toward multilateralism gives Beijing the leeway to influence regional politics. The implementation of the IPS requires multilateralism, but Trump prefers to exert pressure bilaterally. Although China has been under unprecedented pressure over economic and trade issues in the last two years, Trump’s abandonment of the TPP has deprived the United States of powerful leverage to bring Beijing to its knees. Trump’s trade war has alienated more than united American allies and partners, and his threat to destruct WTO scares allies and non-allies alike. Beijing took this opportunity to adopt the strategy of “play off one power against another” by providing the EU with more trade concessions and improving relations with Japan. Some Chinese scholars have assessed that the Trump administration’s unilateralist policy and apathetic attitude toward multilateral institutions have increased the dissatisfaction of its allies and partners with Washington and weakened Washington’s strategic mobilization capacity and influence over rebuilding regional order in Asia.⁴⁹ This gives Beijing opportunities to push forward its own multilateral projects, such as the BRI, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Beijing is not ready to fill the vacuum left by the United States over Trump’s disregard for human rights and liberal democratic values.

But if Trump is reelected in 2020, Yan Xuetong (閻學通) suggests, it may be possible that Beijing will take the opportunity to package itself as a standard bearer of human rights or, in other words, “morality” as the slogan for promoting “soft power” in Asia-Pacific.⁵⁰

The original IPS objective was to unite American allies to contain China’s growing influence. But Beijing has taken advantage of Trump’s blunders to improve relations with its Asian neighbors. China has territorial disputes with ASEAN countries in the South China Sea, some being US allies or partners Washington is supposed to support. Yet compared to the Obama administration, Trump is simply not adept at exploiting their conflicts with China, and as a result, China has improved relations with these countries. One scholar observes that the Trump administration has left small and medium-sized countries in the Asia-Pacific region feeling frustrated and worrisome because ASEAN’s dominant role in managing East Asian security and institution building has declined.⁵¹

5. How Likely is the Quad to Become a Tool to Contain China?

The Quad is the signature project for the US IPS. The further consolidation of the Quad and its possibility of turning into a mini-NATO in the Indo-Pacific region would be a nightmare for China’s regional security policy and international environment. Yet Beijing’s assessment of the Quad development is a mixed bag, including both good and bad news.

The US IPS is a two-layered construct. One layer concerns how to build a free and open Indo-Pacific geopolitical framework to cope with China’s rising power and influence. It is a difficult task, as ASEAN does not want to choose sides between Beijing and Washington and the United States cannot prevail on all regional political issues. The other layer concerns how to substantiate the Quad as the core pillar for the US vision of “free and open Indo-Pacific.”⁵² The driving force for the Quad comes not from whether the relations between the Quad countries and China are good or not but from a shared perception of threat. Built on this shared threat perception, the Quad started in 2007 but was very short-lived until it was revived in late 2017. Since its revival, the Quad has become a visible feature of the US IPS. It is cited in the 2017 US national security strategy as an exemplar product of developing a “strong defense network with our allies and partners.” It is considered by the Pentagon as an example of “networked security architecture” that would promote deterrence and stability by linking US allies and partners.

The Chinese response to the Quad in 2007 was relatively muted, though Beijing strongly objected to the creation of any Cold War-type security structure in the region. As seen from the published literature, the Chinese assessment of the Quad has become more alarming in the last few years. Japan was the enthusiastic initiator of the Quad in 2007, growing out of the idea of an “Asian Arc of Democracy.” While Beijing has traditionally favored Asian “homegrown” regional institutions like ASEAN+3, Tokyo’s proposal of the Quad was viewed as an “Asian NATO.” In recent years China’s BRI and Trump’s protectionist trade policy have put Tokyo in a dilemma. Japan expressed skepticism, disdain, and anxiety when Beijing put the BRI and AIIB offers on the table. Tokyo was hesitant to take the offer, but its trust level with Washington also ran very low as Trump’s protectionist trade policy and economic pressure really hurt Japan. Meanwhile, Sino-Japanese economic and trade cooperation began to pick up in recent years, and Tokyo believes that BRI will be good for its economy. By mid-2017, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe made clear his support for BRI.⁵³ The exchange of visits between the heads of governments in 2018 further boosted the level of trust and normal relations between Japan and China, which had been stalled since 2012. There is no doubt that Japan’s economic cooperation with China is not in line with what Washington expects Tokyo to do under the IPS framework. But if Washington strongly opposes Tokyo’s economic cooperation with Beijing in the BRI projects, what can it offer Tokyo in return? Can it make more concessions to Tokyo on bilateral trade issues? It seems unlikely for Trump given his “America first” agenda. Moreover, the two countries also have differences over the distribution of military spending, and Tokyo has become increasingly discontent with Washington’s demands. This has led Chinese scholars to think it is unclear whether the Japanese prime minister will remain interested in the Quad or not.⁵⁴ Horimoto Takenori, a Japanese scholar, even went further to argue that US-Japan relations have begun to lose ground and that Japan cannot entirely rely on the United States as its sole ally.⁵⁵ Yet, the Covid-19 pandemic and the Hong Kong national security law changed the warming up atmosphere between Tokyo and Beijing in 2020. As a result, Chinese President Xi Jinping’s scheduled visit to Japan was put on hold.

If the Japan case shows there is plenty of leeway for Beijing influencing the Quad countries, the Australian case tells a bit of a different story. Australia doesn’t have conflict of interests with China regarding

territory and security. Most Australians do not want to see their country as a bridgehead against China. Australia wants an inclusive and open Indo-Pacific framework.⁵⁶ Washington has repeatedly encouraged Australia to have joint naval patrols in the South China Sea, into waters where China claims sovereignty, but Canberra has rejected the idea, not wanting to provoke Beijing. Diplomatic relations may have been strained over human rights and values issues, but Australia's trade relationship with China is growing ever closer. Now China is the destination for a record 40 percent of Australia's exports, making it the largest foreign market of Australia. The two countries will continue to quarrel on human rights and ideological issues. Canberra's latest concern is Beijing's political penetration and intelligence theft in Australia. For Beijing, however, this is not difficult to solve when time is ripe for Beijing to show some goodwill and make some ostensible commitment to the rights and political issues. In the Chinese view, the United States is a global power, Japan a global economic power, and India a regional power and likely a future global power, while Australia can be only a mid-level power. If Canberra participates more broadly in US-led military activities, it risk losing rather than boosting security. The present animosity from Canberra is simply a result of its discomfort with China's rise, and Australian elites have changed their attitude toward China amid the China threat discourse in the society.⁵⁷

India is regarded by many Chinese analysts as the weakest link in the Quad and for the American IPS. Although many Indian elites believe it is in India's best interest to actively participate in the security cooperation under the Quad framework, New Delhi still insists the Indo-Pacific be a multilateral and open system, and nonalignment remains an important principle for Indian foreign policy. With Moscow and Beijing's support, New Delhi formally joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2017. Russia continues to provide India with advanced weapons and support for New Delhi's bid for permanent membership in the UN Security Council. With limited assistance from Washington, New Delhi is reluctant to offend Moscow and Beijing. Some Chinese scholars suggest that Beijing should use the China-Russia-India trilateral cooperation mechanism to ease the Sino-India conflict and increase the level of mutual trust and confidence building.⁵⁸ Unlike Washington, New Delhi wants ASEAN to play an important role in the Indo-Pacific region, arguing that the main task of the "free and open Indo-Pacific" is economic cooperation, not a military balance against China.

India is the only country in the Quad bordering China. If New Delhi enters military cooperation with the United States, it will put itself at the forefront of the military confrontation with China. If military conflicts between India and China occur, the other Quad countries may not come to India's assistance. For example, the United States, Australia, and Japan did not explicitly support India during the Sino-Indian border standoff in 2017.⁵⁹ India's territorial disputes with China are mainly in the Himalayas. India has limited stakes in the South China Sea, compared with the importance of the Indian Ocean for India. If Washington wants to draw New Delhi against Beijing, it must get New Delhi to agree to hand over some of its naval command and control to the US military. It is unlikely that New Delhi will do so. India wants to improve its military technology by engaging in military cooperation with the American military. A Chinese scholar argues that the United States certainly is not willing to increase its technical assistance to the Indian navy because that would damage the US military status in the Indian Ocean. If US aid to India is insufficient, the IPS will not gain India's full support. India has long maintained a close relationship with Russia and has no military dependence on the United States.⁶⁰ New Delhi also has distrust in Canberra. It has repeatedly refused to invite Australia to participate in the Malabar naval exercises. New Delhi, seeking to maintain its dominance in the Indian Ocean, does not welcome Australia expanding to its turf.⁶¹

The Modi government's strategy now aims to develop the economy instead of acting as a tool for the United States to crack down on China. Some Chinese scholars have suggested that Beijing could give India modest satisfaction with its vanity in the pursuit of great power status and express understanding of India's desire to enter the Asia-Pacific, not to see New Delhi as an economic rival but perhaps in exchange for New Delhi's acceptance of China's entry into the Indian Ocean without obstructing BRI.⁶² Through the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) summit and SCO expansion, Beijing has come quite some way to entertain India's quest for great power status. Beijing has successfully courted India to join the AIIB, New Development Bank, and other economic initiatives and will eventually turn New Delhi into a BRI supporter.

It is still uncertain whether the Quad will be further substantiated and how institutionalized it will be in the near future. Even if the Malabar exercises get upgraded to include Australia's participation, an agreement is reached on joint patrols for freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, intelligence on maritime security is shared, and the four states join

forces to offer coordinated infrastructure financing to counter China's BRI, it is still unlikely that the Quad will become an Asian NATO or a NATO-like entity. The Quad could be part of the regional security architecture, but not the most important pillar of the international security framework in the Indo-Pacific region. It stands no chance to be a military alliance to contain China's rise in the region. It is hard to say that the IPS has really changed or can change the strategic landscape in the Indo-Pacific.⁶³

6. Responding to the US Indo-Pacific Strategy: The Chinese Way

The Chinese government has yet to come up with a formal response to the "free and open Indo-Pacific" proposal and the US IPS. Ten years ago, the Obama administration rolled out the "pivot to Asia" or "rebalance to Asia" strategy, which redirected the post-9/11 US strategic focus from the Middle East to the Asia-Pacific region. The "pivot to Asia" and its policy measures created considerable pressure on Beijing's international posture in Asia. At that time, instead of responding to the "pivot to Asia" in a tit-for-tat approach, Beijing avoided head-on-head confrontation with the BRI, a grand geoeconomic strategy. Ten years later, in response to the Trump administration's IPS, the overwhelming majority of China's IR scholars and think tank members believe there is no need for Beijing to take tit-for-tat action to counter the US IPS, at least for the time being. Instead, China should respond to the IPS and the emerging anti-China narratives in a more constructive, peaceful, and positive manner so that it can mitigate possible national security risks emanating from the American IPS and further extend China's international influence in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond. The hard balancing strategy is neither advocated by scholars nor accepted by the government. Beijing prefers soft balancing and institutional balancing against Washington.⁶⁴ This is the Chinese way to respond.

The Chinese way of responding needs action more than rhetoric. China's BRI is viewed as a vehicle for China to extend its strategic influence and even establish a military foothold in selected strategic locations. Economic leverage gives China access to more locations for action. Chinese IR scholars believe China should make the best use of its BRI projects and make them more beneficial to local people and hosting countries. If more dividends are paid to BRI participating

countries, it will become more attractive than what the US IPS could offer. In some sense, the US IPS could also be complementary to BRI. The financial burden of China can be mitigated if the United States is willing to increase its investments in infrastructure in the countries along the BRI.⁶⁵

Some Chinese scholars argue that the link between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific is part of the globalization process and that it is in China's economic interest to engage more in the Indo-Pacific. Beijing should not perceive the IPS as an attempt by Washington to block the BRI because China cannot undertake infrastructure construction in developing countries alone. Beijing should actively seek Indo-Pacific countries' support for China in order to take advantage of this opportunity to expand power in the Indian and Pacific oceans.⁶⁶ Some even suggest that China should accept the concept of IPS and propose its own IPS. Since the US Secretary of Defense claims that the Indo-Pacific is open, China could well consider some way of joining it.⁶⁷ Similarly, it was suggested that Beijing actively participate in the IPS before it can dilute or disintegrate it.⁶⁸

The solidarity among Quad members is not strong enough to move it forward as a NATO-like entity in the foreseeable future. The Quad is unlikely to do substantial damage to China. Japan, India, and Australia want to balance and hedge against Beijing's rising power, but they also want to take advantage of the booming Chinese economy. The US allies, these countries included, are not sure of Washington's policy direction and preferences under Donald Trump. They are hesitant to follow the American leadership of the Trump administration's new strategic initiatives, which gives China a chance to compete with the United States. On many occasions, President Xi can win more applause than President Trump.⁶⁹ China has now become the largest trading partner of the United States, Japan, Australia, and India. Beijing is confident that they cannot choose to offend China lightly.

In response to the US IPS, Beijing's real challenge and top priority lie in how to develop and consolidate friendly relations with ASEAN countries.⁷⁰ Beijing is now taking the US exit from the TPP as an opportunity to develop multilateral mechanisms with Southeast Asian countries to change their "hedging" strategy against Beijing. Some scholars stress that Beijing should try to eliminate ASEAN's doubts and fears about China and strengthen cooperation with them regarding nontraditional security in order to build mutual political trust. In particular, Beijing should accept ASEAN's Indo-Pacific framework and support ASEAN's leading

role in East Asia's security affairs, taking advantage of the discontent toward Trump among Southeast Asian countries to expand China's influence.⁷¹ Beijing is quietly taking a strategy of inclusive and exclusive institutional balancing against the United States.⁷²

Deepening its relationship with Russia is another area for Beijing's attention. Some Chinese scholars have pointed out that Moscow is also worried about the IPS, and thus Beijing could increase its cooperation with Moscow by supporting the Great Eurasia initiative.⁷³ There is a suggestion that Beijing should ally itself with Moscow in response to pressure from the US alliance system.⁷⁴ However, the vast majority of Chinese scholars disagree with it, and the Beijing leadership has not accepted such suggestions. They are confident that Washington will not pose much of a threat to China and that Beijing simply needs to maintain a partnership rather than an alignment with Moscow. Recently, however, there have been media reports that Beijing and Moscow are discussing how to "provide military help with each other."⁷⁵ A scholar has commented that the possibility of an alliance between the two sides is increasing, but there will be no covenant.⁷⁶

Competing with the United States in the soft power domain is also important for Beijing to answer Washington's new challenge. Beijing has attached great importance to promoting Chinese culture and values overseas. The Chinese Communist Party's propaganda system has created a huge team to promote the BRI in developing countries, which is considered the secret reason as to why Beijing has been more successful than Washington in foreign policy in recent years.⁷⁷ Washington has no counterpart, and it is challenging to set up such a team. Thus, while the United States is actually more helpful to many countries, the people of these countries are not grateful for this assistance. In addition, while some Asian countries worry about China's ascent, they want China to balance out the US dominance. Some liberal democracies, while ostensibly endorsing American values, actually want to see Beijing have ideas and values that are different from Washington's, so that they can avoid Washington's bullying and finger pointing. While liberal democratic values are more attractive, many third world citizens feel they are more comfortable dealing with the Chinese than with the Americans. For example, after Rodrigo Duterte came into power in 2016, he was dissatisfied with US criticism of his human rights record and thus improved relations with Beijing. Aung San Suu Kyi's policy on Muslims has been criticized by Americans, so she improved her relationship with Beijing in

2019. Washington's involvement in Sri Lanka's domestic affairs actually brought pro-Chinese politicians to power. Washington's strategy of democracy promotion has backfired, and Beijing has become a beneficiary of Washington's rigid human rights policy.

7. Conclusion

Studying history enlightens people about the future. China's response to the "pivot to Asia" ten years ago tells us a lot about how China will respond to the "free and open Indo-Pacific" concept and the US IPS today. Beijing's response will be sophisticated and delicate but not blunt. The logic of the self-fulfilling prophecy advises that a prediction could turn out to be true because the believer's behavior or action will make it happen. Beijing does not want and will not start a new Cold War with the United States at the present stage of development.

There have been rising calls for being more vigilance against the Trump administration's new form of containment strategy against China. We have yet to see any formal response from China's top leadership on a more concrete action plan vis-à-vis the US IPS. Policy makers in Beijing care very much about the United States' new regional strategy and policy measures in containing China. These policy measures are "real tigers," not "paper tigers." But at the international strategic level, they cannot be overwhelmed by the American Indo-Pacific containment strategy against China. Xi Jinping is well aware of the fact that China's current strength is not enough to challenge the US primacy in international affairs. But he has to fight a smart game to close the gap between China and the United States in the years to come. Otherwise, China has no chance to be a rejuvenated great power in the world.⁷⁸

US-China relations have hit the lowest point in decades since Nixon's visit to China in 1972. The relationship is increasingly entangled with American domestic politics. Donald Trump is desperate to get reelected in November 2020. As he did in the 2016 campaign, Trump is repeating the "getting tough with China" talking points to resonate with his voters in the 2020 presidential race. In so doing, the Trump administration could well continue provoking Beijing over technology, trade, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the South China Sea issues. As the two countries are edging toward a new "cold war", Beijing has no choice but holding its bottom line and avoiding severe conflicts with Washington.

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