



THREE TRAPS IN BUILDING THE INDO-PACIFIC NARRATIVE THUS FAR

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Japan's idea of Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), first debuted about a decade ago, is having a second chance with new spin. This time, the project is being collectively promoted by the US, Australia, and India as well, and has won signs of support by France and even the UK. This renaissance signals an important mobilization among 'like-minded' states. Beyond ongoing deliberation on what FOIP means and whether its objectives and strategies are clear, the language associated with the FOIP has already created concerns. A FOIP narrative that seeks buy-in from supporters and partners must avoid the following three traps.

Trap one is insincerity. Rhetoric that emphasizes the rule of law while pointing fingers at those who disrupt it, while much needed, must be carefully calibrated. It is essential to clarify the principles and norms that are shared and need to be defended, and that this is not a clash of values: ours vs yours (whoever 'our' and 'your' turn out to be). FOIP, presumably, aspires to be a comprehensive framework in the strategic, economic, and normative spheres. But if rhetoric about values is overemphasized, it risks invoking a sense of insincerity and condescendence. The audience is not ignorant of history: France's involvement in the Pacific did not stem from rule of law considerations, and US involvement in Southeast Asia has not always been driven by benevolence. In Asia, memories of the Cold War are hot not cool.

The 'Indo-Pacific' project is not being pursued because of a crisis of values; it was prompted by common concern about China's expanding role and undermining of the existing order. It is primarily a strategic motivation. If the FOIP project aims at winning over more like-minded states, it needs both convergence of strategic interests and hearts and minds in the international community. A balance needs to be struck. Over-emphasis on values (because of lack of clarity of main objectives) will drive away many who might otherwise be "like-minded."

Moreover, a value-based narrative risks the return of the "Western" vs. "Asian values" debate. Southeast Asia – the cockpit of great power competition – would be first to react (*nota bene* the "Asian values" debate originated here, with one of its authors – Dr Mahathir – having returned to Malaysian politics). Even if the revival of "Asian values" is unlikely, the value-based narrative of FOIP complements the one China has been making – emphasizing the 'colonial' and condescending attitude of the imperialists when speaking to Asian counterparts.

Consider Vietnam. Its relationships with the US and Australia have developed significantly in recent years. Already strong ties with India and Japan have continued to progress. All this makes Vietnam one of the most likely candidates to become a "like-minded country" in the region, whose embrace of the FOIP would be consequential. But Hanoi's main security challenges include territorial integrity (which make it increasingly concerned about China's action in the South China Sea), and regime continuity. Over-emphasis on democracy by the US and its allies could alienate many in Southeast Asia, where democracy is having hard time. More importantly, with all that is going on in US domestic politics, preaching about democracy, rule of law, and multilateralism exposes US rhetoric as empty. International perceptions of Trump's actions undermine the credibility of values-based FOIP rhetoric.

The second trap is insensitivity. The FOIP as a counter-proposal to China's overwhelming geo-economic influence is attractive, but it can turn unproductive when articulated as "choose us or China." It is an insensitive proposal for Southeast Asia, which is deeply intertwined economically and politically

with China. Particularly when US engagement is more than ever being seen as far from convincing and reliable. Moreover, among the audience of small- and medium-sized countries there will always be a concern that one day the US and China ‘can strike a deal’ that will leave them hanging high and dry.

The third trap is the risk of incredulity. The FOIP project is ultimately a test of credibility, especially for the US. It needs to prove that it is still a reliable actor and that it can mobilize an international coalition to stand up to China and its growing influence. The US needs to step up and commit to the strategy of working together. For FOIP to fully realize its potential, the ability to convince India to engage will also be a test for the group’s credibility.

The FOIP project is not only about building a counter-narrative. There needs to be content before a narrative can be built around it. Too much focus on building an appealing narrative will distract attention from the pressing need to draft strategic objectives. The overall conflation between these two features of the project comes from a lack of clarity about what Washington wants to do with the FOIP. A rules-based order is the goal and the Indo-Pacific project is the means to get there. But until you know where you want to go, it is difficult to know how to win company and support for the cause.

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