



FOIP HAS A PROBLEM WITH “FREE”

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Countries throughout the Asia-Pacific region, the Indo-Pacific region, and around the world continue to grapple with the concept of a “free and open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP). Despite considerable effort by US officials to explain and flesh out the concept, there remains uncertainty and confusion on many levels and attendant to every component part. One thing is increasingly clear, however: outside the United States, there is little if any support for the normative part of the FOIP. Bluntly put, “free” is a problem.

As US officials have refined the content and contours of the FOIP, they have used virtually identical language to describe the meaning of “free.” For example, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo explained in July 2018 that “When we say “free” Indo-Pacific, it means we want all nations, every nation, to be able to protect their sovereignty from coercion by other countries. At the national level, “free” means good governance and the assurance that citizens can enjoy their fundamental rights and liberties.”

Recent conversations throughout Asia offered no support for this agenda. For a variety of reasons, Asian audiences, and some Asian governments, see little value in promoting “freedom” or making it a priority in their diplomacy and bilateral relations.

The most frequent assertion is that Asians are more concerned with prosperity and middle class status than human rights. At a recent conference, several

participants argued that China’s extraordinary economic achievements over the last two decades have convinced many in the region (and not just Chinese) that they should tolerate some form of authoritarianism if that is the price of progress. They point to 800 million people lifted out of poverty as proof. I have heard similar arguments in meetings and conversations throughout the region.

A frequently heard corollary of this argument is that businesses from advanced democracies prefer autocratic governments because they are faster, more efficient decision makers. Good governance produces bureaucracies, red tape and interminable delays, all of which shrink profits and hurt the bottom line. It is much easier and effective to pay a “consulting fee” or offer a stake in the business to an influential individual if that closes a deal. That is neither “free” nor “open.”

A third claim is that an emphasis on values will antagonize regional governments that are not democratic or deny citizens their rights; Cambodia and Vietnam are mentioned in this context, as is Myanmar for its treatment of the Rohingya and Thailand for its military junta. Not only do those governments object to the pursuit of those values, but other governments swallow criticism for fear of losing the support of Phnom Penh, Hanoi, Naypyidaw and Bangkok in regional geopolitical debates. Even countries that back the FOIP shy away from vigorous prosecution of the human rights agenda for fear of antagonizing potential allies.

Fourth, ASEAN prioritizes unity above all other concerns; as a result, it is wary of emphasizing values because doing so would expose rifts among its members and weaken the organization. Assertions of rights and values are Southeast Asian diplomatic boilerplate, but there is no attempt to address or police member countries’ shortcomings. An emphasis on “free” threatens to split ASEAN, and that is anathema to the organization and its members.

Fifth, there is inconsistency in US policy. Regardless of what US officials say in speeches and press briefings, questions persist about the priority that Washington actually attaches to human rights. Defense of human rights is sporadic and uneven, often a function of some other agenda or interest. Asian

critics are quick to note that Washington has turned a blind eye to offenses when the offender is an ally or partner in some other endeavor, prompting the criticism that US policies are not guided by values but are instead transactional. Similar questions surround its defense of “open,” especially given Washington’s recent enthusiasm for imposing tariffs.

Finally, there is the charge that the defense of values is a thinly veiled way to make the FOIP an anti-China policy. US officials insist FOIP is inclusive and is not anti-China. That is hard to square with US rhetoric. Pompeo’s defense of “free” implies that there are countries that seek to coerce other countries, as well as countries that do not support good governance and that deny their citizens fundamental rights and liberties. In contrast, and through FOIP, the US seeks to protect freedom on both the national and individual levels. Several Indo-Pacific governments deprive their citizens of rights, but only one tries to coerce other nations in the region; that same country is also a human rights offender. (This assertion is often greeted with derision: many regional analysts note that the US is equally quick to throw its weight around and is not above coercion to achieve its interests in the region.)

Regional countries dismiss the US claim that FOIP is not targeting China, and are wary of signing up because they will be accused of taking sides against Beijing, a risky move given China’s growing economic influence and its readiness to punish countries that challenge it. An Indian strategist, after hearing Pompeo’s language and other statements by US officials, suggested that the anti-China tone was responsible for Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s increasing hesitation about endorsing the FOIP concept.

None of this should prevent the US from making “Free” an integral part of its foreign policy. If US authority and legitimacy stem from its defense of values and not just its military power and economic success, any retreat from that position will do great damage to Washington’s ability to lead; by many accounts, the damage is already occurring. Still, the US must be prepared for reluctance and hesitation from partners, real and potential, for making that a priority. It is a price worth paying.

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