



IS THE “INDO-PACIFIC” CONSTRUCT TRUMP’S PIVOT TO ASIA POLICY?

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Words matter greatly in diplomatic statements. They reveal political attitudes and power relations, and are potential precursors to future state actions and policy behaviors. In recent years, the term “Indo-Pacific” has become [widely resonant](#) as a diplomatic and geopolitical construct, especially at the highest levels of Australian, Indian, Japanese, and American governments. During his Asia tour last year, US President Donald Trump consistently used the term when speaking to Asian counterparts.

[Gurpreet Khurana](#) argues that the term “Indo-Pacific” highlights the importance of the “Indian Ocean” in which India, because of its growing profile, would play a greater role in Asia-Pacific affairs, particularly the maintenance of a maritime environment that is conducive to regional economic growth and development. [To others](#), the term “Asia-Pacific” is a “more narrow East Asian or Western Pacific formulation.” This observation has basis because India is absent in economic arrangements such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).

Being expansive in scope and emphasis, the Indo-Pacific construct is not entirely different from the rhetorical operation of the “Asia-Pacific,” which was popularized to accentuate the role of the US in Asia in the 1990s. Against this backdrop, some wonder whether the “Indo-Pacific” is “just a [code](#) for balancing against or excluding China.” [For India](#), its support for the Indo-Pacific construct complements its need to develop strategic deterrence vis-à-vis China and bolster its “Act East Policy,” which aims to foster greater economic and security engagements with East Asia. Not surprisingly, in the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit held last month in New Delhi, India announced steps to promote greater maritime cooperation with Southeast Asian nations.

The [Indian Ministry of External Affairs](#) had announced that security and defense cooperation are among the major agendas in the 2016-2020 Plan of Action of India-ASEAN Cooperation. Also, India plays an indispensable

role in the “Quadrilateral Security Dialogue” (QSD, or the “Quad”) with Australia, Japan, and the US. Economically, India has partnered with Japan in countering China’s Belt and Road Initiative with an Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC). [For the Trump administration](#), the Indo-Pacific construct is strategically oriented toward China through strong collaboration with US allies and partners. [US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson](#) mentioned that India and the US are the “bookends” in the Indo-Pacific region and are keys to “great coordination between the Indian, Japanese and American militaries.”

Indo-Pacific and “America First”

Trump’s “America First” policy coincides with the Indo-Pacific construct due to relative gains considerations. First, the US seeks to revitalize its economic and industrial power by addressing US trade deficits and “[predatory economics](#)” or unfair trade practices by countries such as China. The 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS) stated that, “economic security is national security” and that China and Russia are “rival powers,” that aim to “challenge American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity.” More recently, in Secretary Tillerson’s visit to Latin America, he boldly [evoked](#) the “Monroe Doctrine” and warned about China’s “imperial ambitions” in the continent. Second, Washington seeks to maintain its status and influence as the preeminent power in the world. This is evident in Trump’s championing of Ronald Reagan’s Cold War slogan of “Peace through Strength,” which implies that the balance of power will [remain](#) in the US’s favor and global peace will be maintained on US terms.

The 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS) was specific [on](#) the need to reinforce the traditional tools of US diplomacy where the Defense Department “provides military options to ensure the President and [US] diplomats negotiate from a position of strength” because “inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security.” The NSS furthers that the US will “compete and lead in multilateral organizations so that American interests and principles are protected” and that the “lead in research, technology, invention, and innovation” ought to be maintained. While many seem to believe that Washington has turned

isolationist and renounced global leadership, US strategic and military presence in the Asia-Pacific region remains intact and deeply engaged.

The US continues to conduct freedom of navigation operations (FONOPS) in the South China Sea and keeps economic and military pressure on North Korea. Although the preference for economic bilateralism, withdrawal from multilateral environmental commitments, and Trump's off-the-cuff remarks have affected US credibility as a global leader. The NSS and NDS also recognize the importance of strengthening Indo-Pacific alliances and partnerships in preserving the US competitive edge and strategic advantage.

To a large extent, the Obama administration's norm-building through a "principled security network" and Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo's "Democratic Security Diamond" or "[Democratic Alliance](#)" in the form of the Quad remain in place. Noticeably, all countries in the Quad have prominent disputes with China, which make their interests strategically aligned.

For example, the US has differences with China on trade, human rights, cyber-security, North Korea, Taiwan, and the South China Sea. India has a border dispute with China in the Doklam region, which overheated last year. Japan has territorial disputes with China in the East China Sea over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. Australia has sensitivities over China's investments in its strategic industries and is concerned about alleged Chinese intervention on Australian domestic politics. All these countries are aware that no one country can unilaterally balance against or challenge China – diplomatically, economically, and militarily. Overall, the term "Indo-Pacific" underscores not only the integration of regions and regional powers, but also the conflation of geopolitical and geoeconomic interests, priorities, and commitments.

Pivot to Asia 2.0

The Trump administration appears to have adopted the "Indo-Pacific" as a framework and active instrument of its Asia strategy. Apparently, though, this is not so different from the Obama administration's 2011 "Pivot" or "Rebalance" to Asia in terms of seeking to sustain US leadership and commitment, centralizing the regional security agenda, and checking Chinese behavior and regional dominance.

Hence, similar to the "Pivot," Trump's Indo-Pacific strategy would impact the foreign policies of regional states due to the need for greater policy coordination and collective response to common threats. And given the pattern of interested parties and shared interests in the "Indo-Pacific" and the "Quad," it is not impossible that such regimes may expand and include other like-minded countries in the region. As one Chinese [scholar](#) noted, the emphasis on the "Indo-Pacific" refers to an "Indo-Pacific

alliance" that China has to deal with. Others have speculated that the Quad is a prelude to an "[Asian NATO](#)."

China has long maintained its strong preference for regional security forums, strategic partnerships, and antipathy to alliances, which it deems Cold War containment apparatuses and evidence of a "zero-sum mentality" that undervalues their rising influence. Should any regional grouping or construct focus on targeting or excluding China, Beijing may respond by intensifying its economic diplomacy and/or by accelerating military modernization and deployments of strategic assets in the South China Sea.

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