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Making Sense of the 'Indo-Pacific'[1]

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Abstract

The Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy has emerged as the Trump administration's signature foreign policy for Asia. While the current US government insists that it is breaking new ground with its policies, there is far more continuity than change in US thinking toward this vital region: The FOIP has a long provenance that has been adopted by governments from both US political parties. This article examines the history of the FOIP concept and outlines its key features and characteristics. It then identifies potential obstacles to its realization of problems that other US administrations have faced. There is one problem that is unique to the Trump administration's thinking, however: the president's emphasis on balancing US trade accounts and returning investment to the US blunts the economic component of the strategy, which could prove to be a fatal flaw at a time of intensifying economic competition with China.

I. Introduction

While the US has long considered itself a European nation – a product of its origins as a European colony and the trans-Atlantic focus of its foreign policy – it has, as Mike Green (2017) has argued in his magisterial study *By More than Providence: Grand Strategy and American Power in the Asia Pacific Since 1783*, engaged Asia since its founding. During the Cold War, it established five alliances and fought two ground wars in the region – in Korea and Vietnam. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the US has focused more intensely on the Asia-Pacific region, and explaining and justifying that presence and attention has been a constant for national security decision-

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makers. In other words, whatever the label that is affixed to US foreign policy toward this vital region – and it changes with regularity – the underlying motivations have been constant. For all that appears to be new and novel in US policy toward Asia, there is far more continuity than change.

This continuity is evident when one probes the latest incarnation of US engagement with the region, the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP). The discussion that follows attempts to explain the origin of this concept, its contours and the challenges it faces as the US and its allies and partners try to make that vision real.

II. Donald Trump and the Art of Rebranding

The first reference to the 'Indo-Pacific' as a strategic concept by the government of US President Donald Trump occurred in a speech at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) by then Secretary of State Rex Tillerson (2017). That talk was essentially a preview or introduction to the framework that Trump himself would use during a five-nation tour of Asia the following month, although the president sometimes would refer to 'the Indo-Asia-Pacific region' as well.

In fact, the concept has a much longer provenance. Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo (2007) first spoke of an 'Indo-Pacific' in an address to the Indian Parliament. The Obama administration took up that framework as it rolled out its "rebalance to Asia." Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (2011) used the term in her article "America's Pacific Century," as did President Barack Obama (2011) in his speech to the Australian Parliament. The Asia policy teams in the Departments of State and Defense were aggressive proponents of the concept: Kurt Campbell, Clinton's peripatetic assistant secretary for East Asia and the Pacific, was an especially tireless advocate. The US was not the only government to adopt that framework. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi (2012) subsequently used that referent and Australia officially embraced the term in its 2013 Defense White Paper. By 2013, one analyst could conclude that "Asian geopolitics is abuzz with talk of the 'Indo-Pacific'" (Medcalf, 2013).

While that phraseology has a longer record than the Trump administration may like to admit – and that government is committed to the idea that it is breaking new ground in all its policies – the logic that guides US thinking has an even longer history. In the late 1980s, Admiral Thomas Hayward, head of US Pacific Command (PACOM), developed war-fighting plans that assumed a

single operational theater of the two oceans (Green, 2017, p. 384). That approach endures: when Admiral Harry Harris was head of PACOM (from 2015-2018), he was often quoted saying that his area of operations (AOR) stretched "from Hollywood to Bollywood, from polar bears to penguins." US President Bill Clinton was eager to include India in his Asia policy. That country's 1998 nuclear test created a powerful obstacle to the improvement of relations with the US, but the allure of the world's largest democracy and its slowly accelerating economy proved overwhelming. The foundation of US policy under Clinton – and continued by his successors -- was a belief that security challenges in South Asia and the Indian Ocean demanded a wider perspective and a working relationship with Delhi. President George W. Bush stayed the course and went still further as he sought partners to counter Muslim extremism in Central and southern Asia.

The Bush administration had another reason to embrace India as it assessed Asia: the rise of China. Deng Xiaoping's pragmatism and the resulting reforms had spurred nearly a decade of double-digit growth in China by the time that Bush took office and his administration worried that China's use of its newfound wealth to modernize its military was creating a mounting proximate threat to US interests. US strategists considered a democratic, market-oriented India to be an invaluable counterweight as they sought ways to constrain China and complicate its security planning.

At the same time, however, the US and China partnered in the fight against terrorism and Washington made a priority of that role. As a result, the Bush administration never developed an Asia-Pacific or Indo-Pacific strategy.[3] Obama ended Bush's 'global war on terror' and emphasized instead the rise of Asia, which yielded the 'rebalance' (or the 'pivot') as a new framework to understand global power dynamics. At its core, the rebalance acknowledged the centrality of Asia (in its broadest conception) to US national interests, and the geography of that region demanded the linkage of the two oceans. Today, the Trump administration rejects the language of the re-balance – and anything else that Obama supported – but it has embraced its logic (Gamel, 2017).

III. Explaining the Indo-Pacific

In his speech at CSIS, Tillerson (2017) summarized that history. He noted that "[t]he Pacific and the Indian Oceans have linked our nations for centuries.... As we look to the next 100 years, it is

[3] Conversation with a former Bush administration Asia policy official, summer 2005.

vital that the Indo-Pacific, a region so central to our shared history, continued to be free and open." He added that "40 percent of the world's oil supply crisscrosses the Indian Ocean every day, through critical points of transit like the Straits of Malacca and Hormuz." They travel sea lines of communication that provide lifelines for the economies of Northeast and Southeast Asia; it is estimated that 90 percent of the energy that fuels the Japanese and South Korean economies travels those routes. One authoritative analysis concluded that an estimated $3.4 trillion in trade transited the South China Sea in 2016, nearly 21 percent of global trade.[4]

While the speech got attention, it quickly became clear that articulation of the concept was well ahead of its implementation. State Department officials were soon referring to an 'Indo-Pacific strategy,' adding that a core component of their thinking was that the region would be 'free and open.' Alex Wong, deputy assistant secretary of State for East Asia and the Pacific, explained that. "We want the nations of the Indo-Pacific to be free from coercion, that they can pursue in a sovereign manner the paths they choose …. at the national level, we want the societies of the various Indo-Pacific countries to become progressively more free – free in terms of good governance, in terms of fundamental rights, in terms of transparency and anti-corruption." Open, for the Trump administration, means "open sea lines of communication and open airways…open logistics – infrastructure …. open investment….open trade…".[5]

Secretary of Defense James Mattis (2018) provided more detail in remarks to the annual Shangri-La Dialogue, a regional defense meeting that is held in Singapore. He described the Indo-Pacific strategy as "a subset of our broader security strategy" which involved "deepening alliances and partnerships as a priority." Central to its implementation is deepening engagement with existing regional mechanisms as well as seizing on new opportunities for multilateral cooperation. From his perspective – and it is important to note that it is the secretary of defense who is speaking – there are four main themes to the Indo-Pacific strategy: expanding attention on the maritime space by helping partners build naval and law enforcement capabilities and capacities to improve monitoring and protection of maritime orders and interests; interoperability, to ensure that the US military can more easily integrate with others; strengthening the rule of law, civil society, and transparent governance; and private sector-led economic development with no empty promises or

[4] https://chinapower.csis.org/much-trade-transits-south-china-sea/

[5] Wong (2017); Wong repeated the same statements a month later In testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee: https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/051518_Wong_Testimony.pdf

surrender of economic sovereignty.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo (2018) offered additional insight from a diplomatic perspective in a speech.[6] He again noted the region's "great importance to American foreign policy," calling it "one of the greatest engines of future global – of the future global economy, and it already is today." He repeated that by 'free' the US means every nation is "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." Open, Pompeo continued, means that all regional countries "enjoy open access to seas and airways. We want the peaceful resolution of territorial and maritime disputes. … Economically, open means fair and reciprocal trade, open investment environments, transparent agreements between nations, and improved connectivity to drive regional ties."

He then articulated an 'Indo-Pacific Economic Vision,' in which the US aspires to "a regional order, of independent nations that can defend their people and compete fairly in the international marketplace. We stand ready to enhance the security of our partners and to assist them in developing their economies and societies in ways that ensure human dignity. We will help them keep their people free from coercion or great power domination." The US seeks "strategic partnerships, not strategic dependency."

IV. Dissecting the Indo-Pacific

As the Trump administration has developed its Indo-Pacific strategy and sought to make its vision concrete, core principles and features have emerged or become clearer.

First, the geography of the Indo-Pacific is critical. Since its two defining features are oceans, the FOIP strategy is largely maritime in nature. This puts an emphasis on cooperation among littoral governments, and prioritizes programs and programs that include navies and coastguards. The primary form of cooperation that has emerged since the concept was announced has been security-oriented, and has been operationalized in the Quadrilateral Dialogue ('the Quad') that includes the US, Japan, Australia and India (Heritage Foundation, 2018).

[6] This section draws on Cossa and Glosserman (2018).

Geography raises a basic question as well: What is included? The Indian and Pacific oceans are huge. Does the Indo-Pacific include all of them? Typically, when Pacific nations are discussed, they are from North America; there is no mention of South America. This contrasts with Asia-Pacific organizations, such as APEC (the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum), which includes South American countries like Chile. Yet if the southeastern limits are murky, so too are the western boundaries. Pacific Command (recently renamed the Indo-Pacific Command) extends to India; for many Americans, the 'Indo' component of the Indo-Pacific stops at the midpoint of the Indian subcontinent. Japanese strategists don't stop there, however, and push the boundaries of its FOIP all the way to Africa and include the Persian Gulf region, since the supply lines they seek to protect extend that far. (They are also aware that China's ambitious foreign policy project, the Belt and Road Initiative, or BRI, includes Africa.) Another geographic question is raised by the absence of 'Asia' in the Indo-Pacific label. When strategists referred to the 'Asia Pacific,' there was no doubt that continental Asia was included. While much of that land mass can be included in the Indo-Pacific, how much is uncertain. How far inland will Indo-Pacific projects extend? Are landlocked countries included?

Geography puts Southeast Asia at the heart of the strategy – literally, since it is where the two bodies of water converge. It is only natural then that ASEAN (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations) assumes outsize importance in any Indo-Pacific strategy. ASEAN protects its position as convener, gatekeeper and arbiter of issues of concern to the region and does so by insisting on 'ASEAN centrality,' or the use of ASEAN-chaired institutions and mechanisms for regional economic and security dialogues. As a result, it calls the shots when engaging large extra-regional powers, managing the competition among them and maximizing opportunities to maneuver among them. Secretary of Defense Mattis mentioned the phase 'ASEAN centrality' four times at the Shangri-La Dialogue, and Secretary of State Pompeo emphasized the US commitment to the concept at the ASEAN Ministerial meetings and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in early August (Hussain, 2018).

Second, the Indo-Pacific strategy is increasingly focused on values. The *National Security Strategy* mentions a "free and open Indo-Pacific,"[7] but it is merely a desired end state. In Tillerson's CSIS speech (2018), he referred to the US desire to ensure that the region stays "free and open." Now,

[7] *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, December 2017, p. 46.

officials speak of a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific,' or FOIP, strategy: the two adjectives are an integral part of the vision. For the Trump administration, this means an emphasis on the rule of law, peaceful resolution of disputes, good governance and the protection of human rights. Tillerson explained that "our starting point should continue to be greater engagement and cooperation with Indo-Pacific democracies." That cooperation is open-ended, however; all countries can join. But plainly, some governments are perceived as less committed, if not hostile, to those values. This normative dimension has triggered unease in Southeast Asia. Some of those governments fear that is a not-so-subtle attempt to exclude China – to draw a line through the region – or they worry that it will exclude some Southeast Asian governments, which would do great damage to ASEAN unity.

A third key feature of the Indo-Pacific strategy is the role played by India. The Tillerson speech was delivered at an event sponsored by the India Chair at CSIS and was intended to signal a more expansive approach to the region. Mattis echoed that perspective in June, arguing that "the U.S. values the role India can play in regional and global security, and we view the U.S.-India relationship as a natural partnership between the world's two largest democracies, based on a convergence of strategic interests, shared values, and respect for a rule-based international order." India Prime Minister Narendra Modi has also embraced the language of the 'Indo-Pacific' using it at his keynote speech at the 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue. But he also stressed that "India's vision of the Indo-Pacific region is a positive one…By no means do we see it directed at any country. … New Delhi's engagement in the area will be inclusive" (Chandron, 2018).

The fourth and perhaps most important element of the FOIP for the Trump administration is the relationship with China. The guiding principle of the Trump team's strategic thinking is the return of 'great power competition,' as was detailed in the US *National Security Strategy*, the seminal strategy document of any US administration. In Asia, the primary 'great power competitor' is China and a series of US administrations have struggled with the proper response to 'the China challenge.' They have sought to balance intensifying US-China political competition in Asia with a need to partner with Beijing to address security challenges, to cooperate on global order and to ensure that the world's two largest economies are working together rather than at cross purposes. Until a few years ago, the cooperative element of the relationship prevailed; in the Trump

administration, competition is gaining the upper hand. The FOIP is seen by most observers as a device to frame that competition and use US strengths to prevail.

It is difficult to turn strategy into a policy, however. The day-to-day workings of any relationship can influence and often override the seemingly clear imperatives of strategic logic. The task is immeasurably more difficult when the ultimate US decision-maker does not like being bound by such abstractions and prefers his own intuitions when it comes to acting on behalf of the national interest. In practical terms, this has meant that President Trump's efforts to build a strong personal relationship with Chinese President Xi Jinping have made it difficult to see consistency in policy. Trump's priorities differ as he confronts events and he seems determined to maintain good relations with Xi to maximize his leverage with him. In addition, the president sees uncertainty as a positive thing, a tool that he can use to his advantage. The result is a powerful disconnect between policy and rhetoric and confusion about what the US is doing and why.

V. The Challenges Ahead

For many US strategists, the Indo-Pacific framework is an obvious response to political and economic developments. It fits 21st-century geostrategic realities, maximizes US strengths -- its maritime capabilities, its network of alliances and partners throughout that geographic space and its soft power – and promotes an effective sharing of burdens among like-minded nations.

Unfortunately, several problems in both conception and implementation threaten the success of the FOIP. Some are practical. For example, disagreements over the geographic reach of the Indo-Pacific must be worked out if governments are to cooperate. There must be agreement on the area covered if security-related cooperation is to be effective. It should be noted too, that there are many uncertainties about the Quad as well. Even among members, there are disputes about its mission and scope.

There are other more troubling issues. The first concerns values and the role they play in the strategy. The US identifies democracy as the starting point for cooperation, but rule of law, market-oriented economies, and peaceful dispute resolution are other important values. It is not clear that all those things are 'values': some are principles, some are policies. This lack of precision leads to charges that talk of values is really a way to justify the exclusion of China. And, to be honest, talk of values rings hollow when the US president seems to have little to regard for them. There is a

perception that this administration is transactional in its foreign policy and human rights violations can be overlooked if the offending government can provide something of value to Washington. A related problem is the disregard many governments in the region have for those values. Democracy and the protection of human rights are in retreat in several countries – most notably Myanmar and Thailand – and any emphasis on them is likely to alienate, antagonize or disqualify them from joining the strategy.

A second core issue is India. A generation of US policy makers has seen Delhi as a strategic counterweight to China. India is a regional power that seeks influence not only in South Asia but in Southeast Asia too. The population of the two countries is roughly the same and India's economic success has some of its supporters arguing that it will catch up with or overtake China if all goes well. India's suspicion of China – they have fought three border skirmishes; four, if last year's encounter at the Doklam Plateau is included – is thought to help further align Delhi and Washington.

However, while Washington and Delhi agree on policy and desired regional outcomes, it is likely going too far to say that this convergence permits them to coordinate action in a meaningful way. Delhi cooperates with Beijing too. India and China are revisionist powers that believe the current international order does not reflect their interests; both are members of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa group), which seeks a more multipolar world and they have similar approaches to trade and economic reform. Most important, however, is India's commitment to independence and neutrality. No Indian government will make choices that either compromise that position or even allow criticism that it is doing so. Delhi will likely forego cooperation – even when in its own interest – if there is even an appearance of a loss of independence.

A third concern is China. The US insists that the Indo-Pacific strategy is not intended to contain or counter China. Officials argue that it is an open and inclusive concept, and all countries that adhere to its principles can join. They often don't mention China or instead note that the FOIP "is not just about China" (Pompeo, 2018; Wong, 2018). Yet when officials explain that 'free' means 'free from coercion,' fingers are pointing at Beijing, as it is the only regional actor that seems intent on forcing regional governments to make certain choices. When officials discuss freedom within countries, there is no mistaking the comparison with China, where the repressive tendencies of the ruling Chinese Communist Party appear to be intensifying. And 'open' as explained by US

officials – abiding by rules, not forcing technology transfer, not favoring national champions, not stealing intellectual property – also seems to target China. Finally, the Trump administration's *National Security Strategy* (p. 45) highlights "a geopolitical competition between free and repressive visions of world order [that] is taking place in the Indo-Pacific region," a framework that excludes the possibility of cooperating with Beijing within an Indo-Pacific strategy.

But as was just noted, the US cannot afford a wholly antagonistic relationship with China. The two countries' economies are deeply integrated. China is the largest holder of US Treasury Bills, it is critical to the supply chain of US companies, and is a vital market for US agricultural and industrial goods. China is the source of many of the low-cost goods that US consumers buy. The two countries must work together if they are to solve the North Korean nuclear problem, Islamic extremism, cybersecurity, reduce the risk of inadvertent conflict, to name just a few of the items on their common security agenda.

There is an argument that the US must also be careful about identifying China as its principle antagonist in Indo-Pacific because doing so threatens to draw a line through the region and it is not clear which side regional countries will take. There is some truth to that assertion – and much that is troubling too. Not making a choice is a form of choosing. Countries that sit on the fence are shaping regional outcomes by changing the relative balance of power, even though they assert that they are doing no such thing. Hedging dilutes the power of the status quo power.

VI. Wrong-Headed Economics

The biggest problem for the Indo-Pacific strategy, however, is its economic component – or the lack thereof. The Trump administration is right to argue that the world is increasingly dominated by great power competition, but that competition is increasingly economic. Military competition is a constant and a conflict is a possibility, but the real battleground is economics and money. In that arena, Beijing is being aggressive. It developed the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to fill Asia's yawning infrastructure gap – measured in the trillions of dollars -- and win friends and extend its influence in the process. The Trump administration, however, has been slow to respond, rolling out the economic dimension of its strategy only in mid-summer in Secretary Pompeo's speech. He announced the creation of a $113

million fund to promote public-private partnerships.[8] Officials at the Overseas Private Investment Corp. (OPIC), which provides US government support for US businesses abroad, added that that they hope to double the $4 billion currently invested in the Indo-Pacific "in the next few years."[9] This is part of a larger reorganization of the US aid, assistance and development bureaucracy, which is intended to provide some $60 billion for such efforts worldwide.[10]

The day after Pompeo's announcement, the US, Japan, and Australia unveiled a trilateral partnership for infrastructure investment across the region. Organized by OPIC, Japan's Bank for International Cooperation and Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, it will focus on energy, transportation, tourism and technology infrastructure. It will promote "transparency, open competition, sustainability, adhering to robust global standards, employing the local workforce, and avoiding unsustainable debt burdens."[11]

The BUILD effort is big, but it is still overwhelmed by China's efforts – and the US program is for the entire world, not just Asia. The $113 million program that Pompeo unveiled in July is a sliver of the size of BRI. Pompeo insisted that the discrepancy is not critical: the US prefers a more limited government role and that sum is a down payment on the larger project to reorganize and rationalize the US aid bureaucracy. According to Pompeo (2018), US business practices are far more important than any sum of money: "with American companies, citizens around the world know that what you see is what you get: honest contracts, honest terms and no need for off-the-books mischief."

One basic problem undermines US efforts to compete with China on the economic front: the administration's understanding of economics is wrong. The economic theory that President Trump and his closest advisors use is suited to an industrial, rather than a post-industrial, economy, and does not accurately assess the impacts of globalization. The president is fixated on the size of US bilateral trade (im)balances, but no reputable economist believes that trade balances say anything meaningful about the state of an economy or agrees with the Trump administration's assessment of their significance. Finally, Trump aims to bring money – either in the form of investment or via

[8] https://www.cnbc.com/2018/07/30/pompeo-to-announce-initiatives-focusing-on-digital-economy-energy-an.html.
[9] *Ibid.*
[10] https://www.csis.org/analysis/build-act-has-passed-whats-next.
[11] https://www.opic.gov/press-releases/2018/us-japan-australia-announce-trilateral-partnership-indo-pacific-infrastructure-investment.

trade – back to the US, to spur job and wage growth in the US. In other words, the US goal at its most basic level is to take money away from trade and business partners and redirect those monies back to the US.

The execution of US economic policy has compounded these problems. One of Trump's first acts upon becoming president was to withdraw the United States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), the 12-member trade agreement that sought to develop a new regional economic architecture and ensure that the US was one of its principle creators.[12] Withdrawal did tremendous damage to US leverage and influence. Since then, the US has embarked on a unilateral effort to rewrite global trade rules and outcomes, protesting World Trade Organization (WTO) dispute settlement procedures and imposing tariffs and sanctions on trade partners and practices it deems unfair. Most worrying, the administration claims 'national security' justifications for its actions, which threatens the viability of international mechanisms since they all have clauses that allow member governments to invoke national security to escape censure for violating their rules.

The supreme irony of this policy is that many US complaints about the behavior of its trading partners, and especially that of China, are valid.[13] But the only way to change Chinese behavior is to have a large number of key trading partners establish and maintain a united front against it. Unfortunately, US economic unilateralism has antagonized many of its most important allies in that effort. Even more disturbing is that US behavior now allows Beijing to claim to be a key supporter of the global economic order and can accuse – not without reason – the US of being the principle danger to that order's survival.

VII. Looking to the Future

While the Indo-Pacific concept is both logical and has a long history, its future is uncertain. Success will depend on implementation of the strategy, and ensuring that it receives the resources that administration officials claim it deserves. Previous attempts to prioritize the region – the rebalance in particular – suffered because the reality of US bureaucratic commitments did not match the rhetoric of engagement. As a global power, there will always be many other regions and

[12] Thanks to the determination of the remaining 11 members, and especially Japanese Prime Minister Abe, the deal survived as the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).

[13] See for example the American Chamber of Commerce in China's *2018 China Business Climate Survey Report*, or the European Chamber of Commerce in China's *European Business in China Position Paper 2018/2019*.

crises competing for Washington's attention. Remaining focused on the Indo-Pacific may get easier, but it will never be a given.

That means that the US must continually engage the countries of the Indo-Pacific. Defense Secretary Mattis has made regular visits to the region and Secretary of State Pompeo has joined ASEAN meetings and processes. Unfortunately, his leading role in negotiations with North Korea reduces time for other initiatives; at some point he must hand that job off to the special envoy for North Korea, although crises elsewhere in the world will also demand his attention. The US needs an assistant secretary of state for East Asia and the Pacific and the fact that the position is unfilled two years into the administration's first term is inexplicable. The president's decision to not go to the 2018 East Asian Summit and the APEC Leader's Meeting raises additional questions about US commitment, although Vice President Mike Pence did an excellent job in his place without any of the dramatics that invariably accompany the president when he travels.

Finally, the US should abandon an economic rationale that is illogical and inimical to US interests. That is very unlikely given the president's commitment to Make America Great Again. A recognition and appreciation of the value of allies would eliminate much of the concern and doubt about the US security commitment to the region and make implementation of the Indo-Pacific strategy much easier. The emergence of a tripolar world – in which the third pole is this region, whether labeled the Asia Pacific, the Indo-Pacific or the Asia-Indo-Pacific – is a given. The US, like other western governments, must adapt to this reality. Plainly, they still have a long way to go.

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