



FORGET CHINA:

A Policy for an Interconnected Region

by Scott D. McDonald

The United States (U.S.) must approach the growing assertiveness and revisionism of the People's Republic of China (PRC) by deemphasizing its importance to U.S. policy formation. Although this will seem counter-intuitive to most observers, it is an important first step in placing the very real challenges posed by the PRC in their appropriate context. Neither is this to suggest the intentions and actions of the PRC do not pose a serious threat to the interests of the U.S., for in many areas they do. However, in crafting foreign policy, the U.S. government must first focus on promoting and defending its own interests. By contrast, the popular emphasis on "countering" other states is a second-handed approach that cedes the initiative and allows one's adversary to control one's policy.

That is not to say that U.S. policy should not, where appropriate, be confrontational. Washington should not feel the need to kowtow or appease an increasingly aggressive Beijing. However, any action—cooperative or confrontational—must be taken in pursuit of a larger, positive purpose. The starting point for any policy towards the PRC, therefore, is a grand strategic approach to the Indo-Pacific as a region. It lies in a positive, pro-value orientation towards building the world in which the U.S. wants to live.

As President Biden crafts his foreign policy, one pillar will likely be the promotion of a liberal international order. This vision broadcasts the terms on which the U.S. seeks to engage the world and has been a consistent refrain throughout post-Cold War policy, as highlighted in each president's *National Security Strategy (NSS)*.¹⁵⁴ The Trump *NSS* is the least explicit in seeking a "liberal international order," however, the underlying tenets of such a system are included under the strategy's formulation of "Promote American Prosperity" and "Preserve Peace through Strength."¹⁵⁵ To ensure the Indo-Pacific continues to develop in a direction favorable to the U.S., its regional policy must embrace this legacy and pursue a whole-of-government effort to knit the Indo-Pacific into a cooperative region for growth.

This paper argues that because it is in the interest of the U.S. to maintain a free and open international system, its foreign policy objectives in the Indo-Pacific must be the promotion and protection of that system. Therefore, U.S. policy should be regionally oriented and focused on building a liberal regional architecture beneficial to U.S. interests. The second section argues that putting this policy into practice requires a principled approach, for which the Trump administration's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) framework is well suited, and describes how designing policy around the themes of *individuals, norms, narrative, and presence*, should guide its implementation. Only after outlining policy and strategy for building a region in accordance with U.S. interests, will the final section examine how this regional approach

provides the foundation for meeting the PRC's threat to it. The paper then concludes that U.S. regional policy should adopt the positive focus of leveraging these engagement themes to build and defend a beneficial regional order, rather than focusing on countering the PRC.

A STRATEGIC LEGACY

The post-Cold War foreign policy of the U.S. has been animated by a few core interests. Presidents have phrased them differently, and placed emphasis on different attributes, but they all have generally pursued the same articulated national interests: the security of the U.S., its citizens, and allies; a strong economy; promotion of universal values; and a rules-based international order.¹⁵⁶

Most recently, the 2017 *National Security Strategy* published by the Trump administration has placed more emphasis on defense of the U.S. by combining the latter two in "Advancing American Influence" and adding a fourth interest focusing on strengthening the U.S. national security establishment. However, the difference is more one of tone and focus, than of basic interests. In fact, each president has combined them in different ways, but the ideas expressed in these four interests are always there. These remain the foundation on which the U.S. should base its relationships with all nations. These interests hold

regardless of what threats might exist or which actors wish the U.S. harm. The foreign policy of the U.S. exists to promote and defend these interests.

Notice that these interests are not affected by the existence or nature of the PRC. Regardless of how leaders in Beijing envision the region, the U.S. has an interest in pursuing these fundamental tenets of its foreign policy. They speak directly to its governmental role of protecting its citizens and shape the international environment in a manner that best allows it to accomplish this—amenable to trade, founded on its values, and rules-based. Regardless of the actions of other countries, the U.S. should pursue these interests because they are *its own*.

When U.S. policy becomes focused on "countering" the PRC, its actions become oriented on PRC interests, even if in opposition.¹⁵⁷ The U.S. then stops pursuing a vision of the future and focuses on tearing one down. This is destructive and does not lead *towards* anything of value. "Once an adversary's interests are accepted as the starting point of one's own deliberations, any relationship between the chosen course of action and one's own interests becomes purely coincidental."¹⁵⁸ Therefore, instead of allowing PRC actions and denunciations to determine how and when the U.S. acts or refrains from acting, the U.S. must put its interests at the forefront and act to gain and maintain them. This means focusing on an interest-based approach to shaping the regional order and resisting the urge to slavishly oppose PRC policies, initiatives, and deployments.

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One example of the dangers of attempting to compete with the PRC's brand of foreign policy is development diplomacy "follow-the-leader." This arises from the fear that the headlines promising large quantities of PRC-distributed development loans will somehow indicate that the PRC cares more than the U.S. and is a more relevant power. In response, U.S. officials have made public statements attempting to show how much money the U.S. contributes to the Indo-Pacific region.¹⁵⁹ This is counter-productive in three ways. First, by shifting the terms of discussion to a comparison of who gave the most money, it sacrifices interest-based vision and values promotion to chest thumping. It makes the U.S. just another autocrat telling a region how it should be governed, rather than a benevolent partner interested in cooperating for mutual benefit. Second, by constantly comparing itself to the PRC, the U.S. inadvertently makes the PRC the standard of value, further eroding the salience of U.S. interests and values. Third, to the extent these funds are provided by U.S. tax dollars, it crowds out private investment, substituting statism for capitalism and undermining the principle of free trade. In fact, despite their cost to U.S. interests and reputation, U.S. officials admit these government projects pale in comparison to the investments in the region made by private U.S. citizens.¹⁶⁰ In short, these funds accomplish little, beyond painting the U.S. with a PRC brush—a comparison that is ultimately not in the U.S. interest.

Although actual implementation may not always be perfect, the U.S. has a legacy of an enunciated policy based on a core set of national interests. These interests still serve as a solid foundation for a U.S. approach to the Indo-Pacific. However, the U.S. has had a tendency in the 21st century to orient its Indo-Pacific policy not on these interests, but on the specter of a rising PRC. This has undercut the promotion of U.S. interests and led to counterproductive policy choices. However, if the U.S. embraces an interest-based policy it can design a strategy that promotes the cooperative, rules-based liberal order enshrined in decades of national security strategies.

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these, in April 2018, preceded the first substantive enunciation of the principles of FOIP in May 2018 by Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Alex Wong and Assistant Secretary of Defense Randall Schriver during Senate testimony.¹⁶⁴

During their joint Senate testimony, the State and Defense representatives echoed each other in outlining the four principles of FOIP: 1) international rules-based order, 2) ASEAN centrality, 3) promotion of the common values of "free" and "open," and 4) cooperative pursuit of prosperity, security, and liberty that

provides a useful articulation of the principles that can serve as the basis of regional order building.

The Biden administration should resist the urge to throw out FOIP simply because of its attachment to the Trump administration. In fact, the term was originally borrowed from Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who introduced it at the Sixth Tokyo International Conference on African Development.¹⁶¹ More importantly, its incarnation as U.S. policy was informed by input and feedback from regional leaders. In 2018, during a welcome show of integrated policy development, the National Security Council, Department of Defense, Department of State, and the U.S. Pacific Command convened two separate workshops in Honolulu to solicit the input of regional leaders regarding how well the proposed principles aligned with their countries' values.¹⁶² Saira Yamin, a professor at the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies and participant, observes that these workshops revealed "a strong consensus on core principles of a free and open Indo-Pacific."¹⁶³ It is noteworthy that the first of

excludes no nation.¹⁶⁵ These four principles outline a vision for the region that is accepted by the majority of regional states, while upholding the interests that have spanned post-Cold War U.S. administrations.

Maintaining consistency in policy reduces confusion and angst among regional partners trying to adjust to a new administration. Consequently, if there is no good reason to change it, maintaining FOIP as a means of orienting to the region aids U.S. policy. However, publishing these principles is insufficient. The Biden administration needs to develop an integrated approach to implementing them. The U.S. should undertake a deliberate and enduring strategy to engage in and across the Indo-Pacific in promotion of its desired regional order. These actions should support broad U.S. policy goals by acting across four themes: *individuals*, *norms*, *narrative*, and *presence*.

Individuals

Fundamental to the American experiment is the idea that the individual has rights with which no government should interfere. It is through the exercise of their own liberty, in the pursuit of their own happiness that lives are lived, products produced, trade occurs, and prosperity blooms. While scholars and statesmen often speak of states and nations, of governments and institutions, it is incumbent

AN APPROACH OF SHARED PRINCIPLES

Having a set of enunciated interests is extremely valuable if it is used to craft and guide the implementation of policy. This section argues that the national interests of the U.S. provide exactly this sort of guideline as the U.S. attempts to shape the evolving security architecture in the Indo-Pacific. However, regardless of the extent of its national power, the U.S. does not inhabit the region alone. To build a regional order that others can buy into, it must determine the intersection of its interests and those of the other regional states. Although its development and roll-out was too slow and it appears to have lost steam well before the end of the Trump administration, FOIP

upon policymakers to remember that every action they take has real impacts on individual lives. Moreover, when their policies constrain the liberty of individuals, governments retard the beneficial effects of trade and interaction that are the source of human progress. U.S. foreign policy should be crafted with an understanding that it affects the manner in which individuals in the U.S. will live their lives, trade, and consume. The government should not treat them as members of corporations, unions, ethnicities, political parties, or interest groups. Instead, foreign policy should be designed to protect the lives and liberties of American citizens and enable their ability to trade freely with the world.

Therefore, U.S. economic policy should not attempt to compete with announcements of PRC government development loans; rather it should embrace getting out of the way of those who choose to do business in the region. While trade liberalization in terms of bilateral and multilateral free trade deals is a step in the right direction, it is insufficient. Trade deals are still managed trade and consist of governments picking winners and losers by choosing what sectors to assist, and what sectors to inhibit. Instead, the U.S. should uphold the principle of individual liberty and begin unilaterally removing tariffs and non-tariff barriers to trade. This is not simply a good, pragmatic way to promote more trade, it is principled defense of the right of American citizens to buy what they want from whomever they want and to sell what they want to whomever is willing to buy.

Recognizing that other states are not monolithic blocks, but also composed of millions of individuals enables policymakers to both see past state-centric language that emphasizes government solutions and craft policies that enable individuals to act. As proven by the million-plus people who immigrate to the U.S. each year—and the millions more who are barred from doing so—individuals will take extraordinary actions to seek better lives for themselves and their families.¹⁶⁶ Allowing them the space to do so expands the opportunities for trade and increases wealth. Therefore, the U.S. should advocate for the broad elimination of tariff and non-tariff barriers to trade, as well as for the removal of restrictions on the free movement of people. By ensuring each U.S. policy option recognizes the importance of the individual for pursuing human happiness, U.S. actions in the Indo-Pacific will uphold the principles of free and open while promoting

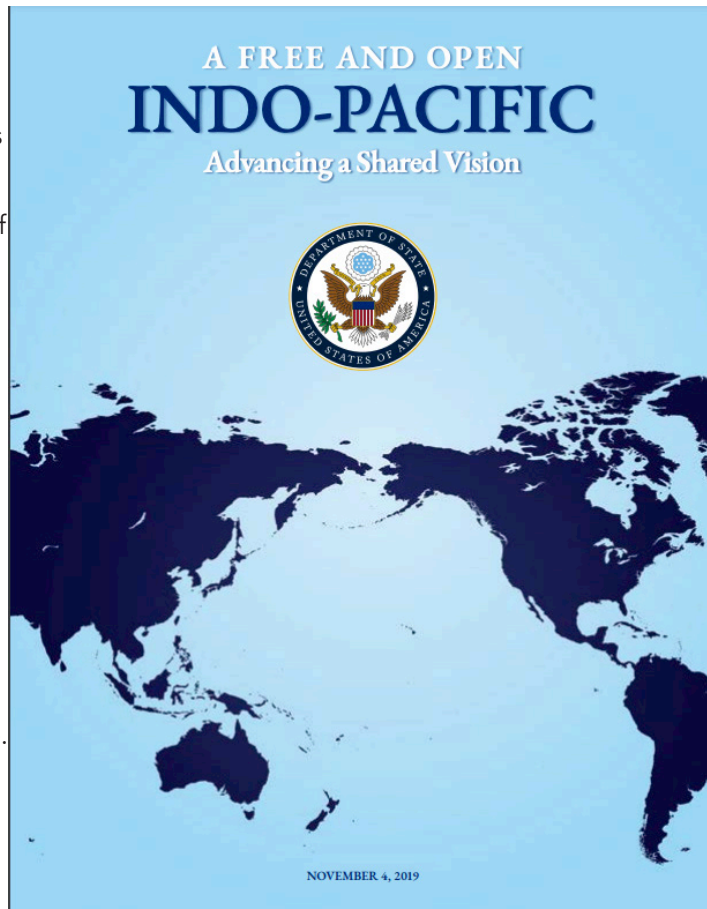
cooperative solutions based on a recognition of individual human agency.

Norms

As iterations of the NSS have repeatedly identified, the U.S. has an interest in promoting the values it deems important. These norms extend from the founding of the U.S. on the principle of individual liberty and recognize that free exchange with others exercising their liberty increases opportunities for mutual benefit. Although the U.S. is unapologetic in its promotion of values, this is not a neo-imperialist undertaking. Rather, these are values

embraced by the majority of states in the region, as confirmed by the 2018 Indo-Pacific Strategy conferences held in Honolulu.¹⁶⁷

The U.S. should leverage this broad-based agreement to create a regional environment that reflects the values of “free” and “open,” so their benefits can be enjoyed by the region’s citizens and displayed for those who doubt their efficacy. Moreover, the U.S. must not act in a manner that treats its own or other states’ citizens as chattel, thereby undermining the values it seeks to promote. Making trade freer and more open is a first step and—as support for the Trans-Pacific Partnership and other trade pacts demonstrates—welcomed in the region. The norms of free and open should be reinforced through the support of institutions and forums—centered on ASEAN where



possible—that encourage cooperative relations both between states and among individuals. This model is easily expanded beyond economics to initiatives, such as reducing trafficking in persons, that highlight how the benefits of these norms reach every aspect of individual lives, while bringing together states in institutions and forums that address shared problems.

Working in partnership with other states to promote and protect international principles of free and open serves to highlight the common stake all regional actors have in the system, and reinforces the ideals of reaching results through dialog, interacting on the basis of mutually acceptable rules, and refusing to allow the region to be governed by the exercise of brute force.

Narrative

The U.S. has been ineffective at maintaining a consistent message in the region. The George W. Bush

administration changed Clinton's "Strategic Partnership" with the PRC to "Strategic Competitor" before switching to what Philip Stephens of *The Financial Times* calls a "sustained stability."¹⁶⁸ The Obama administration attempted to provide Beijing "Strategic Reassurance," then decided to "Pivot to Asia" in the face of the PRC's repeated snubs. They then embraced the twelve-country Trans Pacific Partnership trade block, but failed to push ratification through the Senate.¹⁶⁹ The point here is not to argue for or against any one of these changes, but to note that potential regional partners may find it difficult to divine the winds of U.S. policy.

The Trump administration put its own mark on regional policy branding when it announced FOIP in November 2017, but then did not provide details. Consequently, when asked by a reporter six months later if Singapore would join FOIP, the Singaporean Foreign Minister noted he could not, because he did not know exactly what it was.¹⁷⁰ This is because the Senate testimony marking the first authoritative statement of what FOIP meant was still a week away. In fact, FOIP remains woefully under-communicated. Testimony was followed by Secretary of Defense Mattis' June 2018 comments at the Shangri-la Forum, which enunciated guiding themes of FOIP implementation, and Secretary of State Pompeo's July 2018 speech to the Indo-Pacific Business Forum hosted by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, which announced a few specific programs.¹⁷¹ Subsequently, there was another large gap before the Department of Defense's *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report* was published on 1 June 2019 and the Department of State's *A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision* five months later. Further complicating matters, the generally accepted and positive principles within FOIP have been undermined by confrontational rhetoric aimed at allies and adversaries alike.¹⁷²

The combination of poor messaging and lack of communication discipline has left FOIP to languish in international discourse. According to a search of the Factiva news database, mentions of FOIP in regional English-language news sources have been sparse. In the first 19 months after President Trump's announcement, FOIP was mentioned in only 4,929 articles. By way of comparison, General Secretary Xi Jinping's One Belt, One Road initiative was mentioned in 54,799.¹⁷³ While this was only a rough search of raw data and does not speak to the reasons for the difference, it demonstrates that FOIP has struggled to establish a narrative impact on regional discourse.

If the U.S. decides to retain FOIP as its framework for engaging with the region, it needs to advertise its principles consistently and positively, so the region is aware that U.S. actions are taking place within a policy umbrella that advocates a positive vision of the future. Without a coherent narrative, individual policies appear as disconnected, random acts. Instead, each action should be presented in terms of its contribution to a regional order that is rules-based, ASEAN-centric, Free and Open, and characterized by cooperative solutions. These FOIP principles must become a mantra that regional

partners recognize and understand. In short, the next administration must be forward leaning not only in how it frames a positive vision for the region, but also in how it discusses that goal.

Presence

An important part of communication is synchronizing words and actions. In this regard, the U.S. needs to demonstrate to regional states that their partnerships are valued, and that the U.S. intends to back up its words with actions that buttress its claim that it is an Indo-Pacific nation. It is not enough to say it, cite history, or provide funding to the region. The U.S. must be visibly and meaningfully present in the region whose structure it seeks to shape. This is the most fundamental tool of effective narrative building, ensuring one's actions and words are aligned.

The messaging of U.S. official presence in Southeast Asia has been hamstrung by its inconsistent attendance at regional forums. Chung Chien-peng, a professor of politics at Hong Kong's Lingnan University, notes, "[p]articipating in Asian summitry demonstrates Washington's commitment to multilateralism, a symbolic yet significant metric in a region where process is at least as important as outcomes."¹⁷⁴ People in the region want the U.S. present and feel snubbed when an important regional meeting is missed. The George W. Bush administration was harangued for routinely missing meetings, such as when the new Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice skipped the 2005 ASEAN Regional Forum.¹⁷⁵ Although the Obama administration tried hard to remedy this, Obama's absence from the 2013 East Asia Summit during a government shutdown caused concern that the U.S. could not be counted on and led to descriptions of U.S. policy as one of "strategic neglect."¹⁷⁶ Trump's decision to skip the same meeting, as well as the U.S.-ASEAN Summit in November 2019, led some in the region to speculate that "the U.S. does not see ASEAN as important."¹⁷⁷ If the U.S. is to be viewed as an active architect of the regional order, it must navigate the competing demands of regional summitry and global interests. It must set out clear expectations and then meet them.

However, presence requires more than meetings. To shape the region, the U.S. must actively build cooperative systems. While the five U.S. treaty alliances in the region have long provided a foundation for stability and security, they are insufficient in an increasingly interconnected and dynamic region. When those links were formed, many regional states were just emerging from colonialism and establishing their international identity. Now they are full-fledged international actors that have an opinion and a voice. To fail to include them is to fail in architecture building.

That being said, expanding the network of alliances is not the answer. Neither the U.S. nor regional partners want to expand such relationships. All desire flexibility. Therefore, the U.S. should seek to build multiple issue-specific coalitions that regional states can join where their interests overlap.¹⁷⁸ This is not "ad hoc" multilateralism, but purposeful cooperation to institutionalize interest-based

relationships. This idea was picked up by the Department of Defense in the *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report* of 2019 and branded “Partnerships for a Purpose.”¹⁷⁹ However, although that document was published in June of 2019, there is no reporting of partnerships being established. No doubt they exist, but a Google search turns up nothing.¹⁸⁰ Sadly, the November 2019 Department of State report, *A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision*, does not even mention the concept.¹⁸¹ This is especially unfortunate because the concept should be employed not only by the military, but across every component of national power—diplomatic, informational, military, and economic. States should come together over common interests in each of these lanes to build the region that reflects their values.

Principles and Themes

This section has discussed the importance of approaching the region in a principled fashion and noted that those enshrined in FOIP are a good fit for the interests of the U.S. and the region at large. It then argued that to achieve the vision described by FOIP, the U.S. should be guided in policy formulation by four themes: *individuals, norms, narrative, and presence*. Taken as a whole, these principles and the means to achieve them outline a broad policy framework. It is only after this has been accomplished that U.S. policy should address specific challenges to that vision.

THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

This paper has focused on outlining an interest-based approach to the Indo-Pacific and drawing out the engagement themes that support it—*individuals, norms, narrative, and presence*. It is worth noting that the vision outlined above does not have to exclude anyone. A free and open international order is, by definition, open to anyone who chooses to participate in accordance with its shared principles. Even Partnerships for a Purpose are open to any state that shares the interests being protected or pursued.

That being said, it is readily apparent that the PRC disagrees with aspects of this vision. Where the PRC attempts to disrupt this order, it must be defended in a principled fashion. Some of this can be done proactively using the engagement themes above. Promoting individual liberty, enunciating and reinforcing norms, maintaining consistent narratives regarding what the U.S. is doing and why, and being present in the region as a participant in its architecture all help to inoculate the region against those who wish to undermine its values and its system. However, there will likely remain attempts by the PRC and others to

undermine the regional order. In crafting appropriate policy, the first question should always be: what principles are at stake? The second is: how can they be protected against the threat? This section will answer these questions in relation to specific challenges the PRC is currently posing to regional norms and freedom of the seas.

Sino-centric Norms

The PRC has been constructing a parallel set of global institutions to place itself at the focal point of international norm generation and enable the construction of a Sino-centric regional architecture. The chief difference between an ASEAN-centric or Sino-centric architecture is between cooperation and hierarchy. The ASEAN-centered region consists of overlapping and interlocking interest relationships that create an interest-geography of cross-cutting cleavages. This means that though there will inevitably be differences of opinion, there will be enough issues with interest fault-lines in different places that the region does not divide into distinct blocks. It is not simply interconnected, but variously so across interests. By contrast, the order the PRC is attempting to craft puts them at the center and seeks to create radial lines (belts and roads) leading to Beijing. In doing so, it endeavors to erect a stark cleavage between those that are part of the Sino-sphere and those that are not.

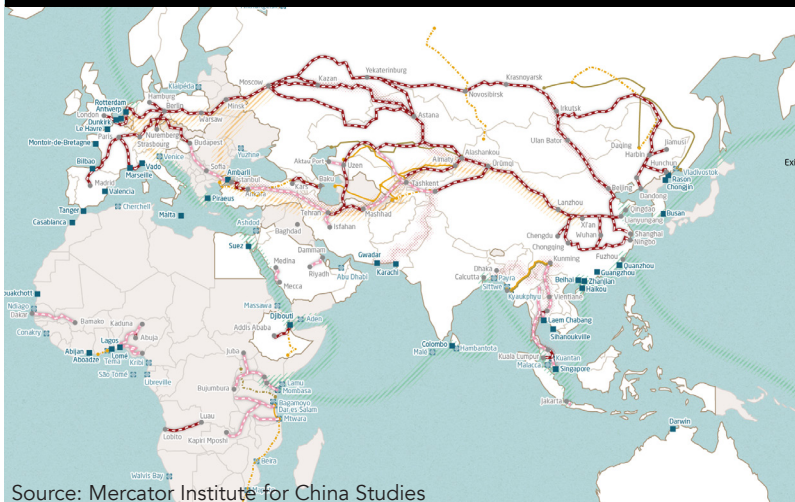
It is in this sense that the One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative is troublesome. Of course, the idea of reinforcing trade links across and around Eurasia is itself beneficial. In fact, it builds upon—and benefits from—the liberal world order the U.S. has built and championed since the end of World War II. Where it is dangerous is in the PRC’s attempt to cordon off a trading regime through which states commit to a PRC-ordered world and the norms of state-centric governance that come with it. Economically,

PRC methods, such as leveraging debt to control developing states, raise the specter of mercantilism and dependency relationships, rather than upholding the principle of free individuals trading for mutual benefit. In fact, the state-development focus of the OBOR projects speaks to the extent to which the initiative is specifically *not* focused on establishing an international order that is free or open. Instead,

it reinforces the discredited concept of mercantilism and enshrines Beijing’s role as the final arbiter of the rules of the 21st century global system. In that sense, it is power-based, not rules-based.¹⁸²

The U.S. should defend against this encroachment in two ways. First, leveraging the above themes of engagement, it should craft a narrative that reinforces individual liberty,

China’s Belt and Road Initiative



Source: Mercator Institute for China Studies

highlights norms, and emphasizes the presence of the U.S. in the region. The unceasing press regarding the achievements and benefits of OBOR constitute a public relations campaign to sell the benefits of a Sino-centric order. However, a negative narrative that focuses on OBOR's dark side quickly becomes reactive and second-handed. Instead, the U.S. narrative should highlight the value of free and open, private sector-led development. Vice President Pence's speech to the 2019 APEC CEO Summit provided this in part, but undercut it by highlighting government-funded attempts to copy PRC largess.¹⁸³

Second, the U.S. should move aggressively to further liberalize the international trading environment to enable private sector development and promote human freedom. As noted above, this can be done through the proactive and unilateral elimination of trade barriers, sending a message that the U.S. is willing to be the vanguard of the free and open order. However, where partners can be found, the U.S. can turn this into a means of maintaining presence through economic Partnerships for a Purpose (PFP). The cooperative approach to regional order building should seek out partners willing to remove tariffs on specific goods and announce the moves jointly, while offering to include others willing to cooperate. Through a Partnership for a Purpose—Free Trade (PFP-FreeTrade) or multiple goods-based PFPs, the U.S. can contribute to a regional architecture promoting economic freedom. Furthermore, these partnerships could be negotiated through and anchored in the ASEAN Economic Community, while leveraging the Initiative for ASEAN Integration for expanding partnerships throughout Southeast Asia. By approaching the challenge to the liberal order in this manner the U.S. acts positively, not reactively, for the principles of FOIP, including reinforcing a rules-based order, centering it on ASEAN, and reinforcing the norms of free and open, while pursuing cooperative solutions.

Freedom of the Seas

Another key challenge to U.S. interests and the principles of FOIP is occurring within the South China Sea, where the PRC is moving aggressively to undermine the current international rule set and overturn the norms of free and open. This is a threat to the U.S. because it directly challenges the foundations of the liberal order upon which it depends. Once again, the U.S. must craft its policy to defend its principles. This threat is put into stark relief by the PRC's use of force against petroleum exploration companies and fishing boats to interfere with their freedom to explore and exploit the resources of the South China Sea. Through these actions, Beijing is violating the principles required to establish and maintain a free and open regional architecture.

To defend the region from this threat, the U.S. should work with all like-minded nations to establish a Partnership for a Purpose dedicated to protecting the

rights of individuals and their businesses to conduct maritime economic activity in the South China Sea. This PFP-MariCom (Partnership for a Purpose—Maritime Commerce) will enlist the support of all regional states willing to provide assets to protect this free and open economic activity from interference and harassment. Following the FOIP principle of cooperative solutions, patrols will be conducted in a multilateral framework with combined command structures. To build regional integration, this PFP should be tied into the system of ASEAN forums. Whether coordinated through the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM) or the ASEAN Law Ministers Meeting, leveraging one of these forums both lends regional credibility to the initiative and enhances

ASEAN's centrality as a hub of the regional security architecture. This solution recognizes the foundational importance of individual liberty, ties it to norms of regional behavior, and demonstrates U.S. presence in a manner that weaves together a narrative that supports the broader principles of FOIP. In short, it leverages the themes of positive U.S. influence to work towards the desired regional architecture.

Objections will be raised regarding the coordination problems inherent in such a partnership, but difficulty is not a valid reason not to try. Some will object that

this is provocative. Not only is this inaccurate, but such a misstatement makes the mistake of playing into the PRC's narrative. In truth, this grouping is no more provocative than a group of friends standing between a playground bully and the kid having his lunch money stolen. The state that uses force to stop free economic activity is the party behaving provocatively. Those who stand up to this coercion in solidarity are acting in self-defense and deterring violence by demonstrating that the bully will pay too great a cost and offend too many people. Others will argue that even if not intended to be provocative, such a PFP could precipitate armed conflict. While the possibility of armed conflict always exists—as it does in the region today—the point is to establish a positive, proactive group of like-minded actors to stand up for the principles they support so that the use of force is less attractive.

A Region Larger than the PRC

While the PRC could challenge the principles that underlie FOIP in multiple ways, it is not the only challenge to regional order. Other PFPs could protect individuals from human trafficking networks or the fallout of natural disasters. In fact, the COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced the need for free and open flows of information and cooperative solutions to problems that transcend traditional state-based security concerns. This cooperation is enabled by finding areas of agreement on what the region should look like, then crafting partnerships to bring about the shared vision. As advances in communication and transportation shrink the region, policy areas ripe for interest-based mini-lateral coalitions to shape a positive regional architecture will continue to expand. The U.S. can encourage this trend by ensuring its policy highlights the *individual*, reinforces *norms*, paints a consistent *narrative*,

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and is underlined by its *presence* in regional forums, groupings, and policy formation.

CONCLUSION

The U.S. seeks an Indo-Pacific region that is free of coercion and open for business. That is a positive vision that has been consistent across presidential administrations. What has been lacking is concerted, consistent policy that consciously promotes that vision, as opposed to responding to tactical threats. Positively oriented policy has been further disrupted by fear of PRC aggressiveness and a concern that something must be done to counter it. This reactionary bent to policy formation is short-sighted and second-handed. If the U.S. continues to follow this path, it will find itself chasing the PRC as it builds its own vision of a hierarchical, Sino-centric region. The PRC cannot actually be ignored, but effective policy towards it can only be crafted *after* the U.S. articulates its own vision for the region and a program through which to achieve it. Therefore, “countering” the PRC is destructive; building a cooperative regional architecture founded on shared norms is productive.

In FOIP, the U.S. has a vision of regional architecture that is broadly shared and beneficial. The Biden administration would be wise to keep its branding and foundational principles. What must change is the manner in which that vision is pursued. This paper has outlined four engagement themes—*individuals, norms, narrative, and presence*—that can serve to guide U.S. regional policy towards achieving the principles of FOIP. An administration that crafts policy in accordance with these themes and aimed at the principles in FOIP will be able to both participate in building a beneficial regional architecture and put itself in position to defend it against any challengers. The Biden administration need not “counter” the PRC, instead it should promote a resilient, interconnected region that can defend itself against threats to its foundational principles.

¹⁴⁵In addition to laying out these four principles, Wong and Shriver defined “free” and “open.” Free: “first, on the international plane, that we want the nations of the Indo-Pacific to be free from the coercion of outside powers. Nations should be able to pursue their own paths in a sovereign manner free from the weight of spheres of influence. Second, “free” means, at the national level, we want the societies of Indo-Pacific nations to become progressively more free—free in terms of good governance, in terms of fundamental freedoms, and in terms of transparency and anti-corruption.” Open: “first and foremost, means open sea lines of communication and open airways. These open sea lines of communication, particularly those in the South China Sea, are the lifeblood of the region. Secondly, we mean more open connectivity in the form of quality, best-value energy, transport, and digital infrastructure that’s driven by private capital investment. Third, we mean more open investment environments and free, fair, and reciprocal trade.” (statement of Alex Wong, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, East Asian and Pacific Affairs), accessed 20 May 2018, <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/hearings/american-leadership-in-the-asia-pacific-part-5-the-asia-reassurance-initiative-act-051518>.

¹⁴⁶Jynnah Radford, “Key Findings about U.S. Immigrants,” Pew Research Center, 17 June 2019, accessed 16 June 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/06/17/key-findings-about-u-s-immigrants/>.

¹⁴⁷APCSS Editor. Yamin.

¹⁴⁸Philip Stephens, “Bush’s China policy may outlast his presidency,” *The Financial Times*, 26 June 2008, accessed 16 June 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/5f6d5306-4399-11d0-842e-0000779fd2ac>.

¹⁴⁹John Pomfret, “America vs. China; A competitive face-off between two Pacific Powers,” *Washington Post*, 18 November 2016, accessed 16 June 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/national/obama-legacy/relations-with-china.html>.

¹⁵⁰Charissa Yong, “Singapore Not Joining US, Japan-led Free And Open Indo-Pacific For Now: Vivian Balakrishnan,” *Straits Times*, 14 May 2018, accessed 16 May 2018, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/singapore-not-joining-us-japan-led-free-and-open-indo-pacific-for-now-vivian-balakrishnan>.

¹⁵¹James N. Mattis, “Remarks by Secretary Mattis at Shangri-La Dialogue,” 2 June 2018, accessed 2 June 2018, <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/1538599/remarks-by-secretary-mattis-at-plenary-session-of-the-2018-shangri-la-dialogue/>. Pompeo.

¹⁵²Lindsey Ford, *The Trump Administration and the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific”* (Washington, DC: Brookings, 2020), p. 2.

¹⁵³Factiva, accessed 19 June 2020. Searches were conducted for news sources in South, Southeast, and East Asia, as well as Oceania. The FOIP search used the string “(“free and open indo-pacific” or foip”) and pacific.” “and Pacific” was added to eliminate possible other acronyms. The OBOR search used the string “(“one belt one road” or OBOR or “belt and road initiative” or BRI) and china.” “Belt and Road Initiative” is an alternate translation disseminated to soften the exclusionary feel of the Chinese “One Belt, One Road.” “and China” was added to the search exclude other potential acronyms. Both results were further modified to remove US news sources from FOIP and PRC news sources from OBOR. Both searches were conducted using the dates 9 November 2018 to 31 May 2020.

¹⁵⁴Chung Chien-peng, “ASEAN-Related Regional Arrangements, China, and the US Rebalancing,” in David W.F. Huang, ed., *Asia Pacific Countries and the US Rebalancing Strategy* (New York: Palgrave, 2016), p. 146.

¹⁵⁵Ralph Cossa, “Condoleezza Rice’s unfortunate decision,” *The Japan Times*, 25 July 2005, accessed 16 June 2020, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2005/07/25/commentary/condoleezza-rices-unfortunate-decision/#.XumMkUVKHPZ>.

¹⁵⁶Jane Perlez, “Cancellation of Trip by Obama Plays to doubts of Asia Allies,” *The New York Times*, 4 October 2013, accessed 16 June 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/05/world/asia/with-obama-stuck-in-washington-china-leader-has-clear-path-at-asia-conferences.html>.

¹⁵⁷Kornchanok Raksasari and Patpon Sabpaitoon, “Trump Skips ASEAN Summit Once Again,” *Bangkok Post*, 31 October 2019, accessed 13 January 2020, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1783449/trump-skips-asean-summit-once-again>.

¹⁵⁸Scott D. McDonald, “Wanted: A Strategy for the Indo-Pacific Region,” *The National Interest*, 7 August 2018, accessed 9 January 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/wanted-strategy-indo-pacific-region-28182>.

¹⁵⁹*Indo-Pacific Strategy Report* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2019), pp. 44-5.

¹⁶⁰On 12 June 2020 a search of [“Partnerships for a Purpose”] returned no links at all related to the program. A Bing search showed no related links for at least the first 100 results.

¹⁶¹*A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision* (Washington, DC: Department of State, 2019).

¹⁶²For a detailed discussion of the nature of OBOR, see Mohan Malik, “Dimensions, Detours, Fissures, and Fault Lines,” *The American Interest* 13, No. 5 (May/June 2018): 1-13.

¹⁶³Pence.

¹⁵⁴See *National Security Strategy (NSS)* (hereafter) (Washington, DC: White House, 1993), p. 5; NSS (Washington, DC: White House, 1999), p. 22; NSS (Washington, DC: White House, 2002), p. 17-23; NSS (Washington, DC: White House, 2010), p. 7.

¹⁵⁵NSS (Washington, DC: White House, 2017), p. 2, 17, 19, and 25.

¹⁵⁶These four interests were paraphrased from the interests enunciated in both editions of the *National Security Strategy* published by the Obama White House. See NSS-2010, p. 7 and NSS (Washington, DC: White House, 2015), p. 2.

¹⁵⁷For a discussion of many ways in which U.S. policy has become second-handed to the PRC see Scott D. McDonald, “Forthcoming Asia Strategy Should Avoid Second-handed Pitfalls,” *The National Interest*, 26 December 2017, accessed 15 June 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-trump-administration-isnt-putting-america-first-23813>.

¹⁵⁸McDonald.

¹⁵⁹See Michael R. Pence, “Remarks by Vice President Pence at the 2018 APEC CEO Summit,” Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, 16 November 2018, accessed 15 June 2020, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-vice-president-pence-2018-apec-ceo-summit-port-moresby-papua-new-guinea/>.

¹⁶⁰See Michael R. Pompeo, “America’s Indo-Pacific Economic Vision,” Washington, DC, 30 July 2018, accessed 5 January 2020, <https://www.state.gov/remarks-on-americas-indo-pacific-economic-vision/>.

¹⁶¹Soeya Yoshihide, “Indo-Pacific: From Strategy to Vision,” in Ron Huisken, ed., *Regional Security Outlook 2020*, (Canberra: Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific, 2017), p. 16.

¹⁶²APCSS Editor, “DKI APCSS hosts Indo-Pacific Strategy Workshop,” 30 April 2018, accessed 10 June 2020, <https://apcss.org/dki-apcss-hosts-indo-pacific-strategy-workshop/>.

¹⁶³Saira Yamin, “DKI APCSS hosts second Indo-Pacific Strategy Workshop,” 1 November 2018, accessed 10 June 2020, <https://apcss.org/dki-apcss-hosts-second-indo-pacific-strategy-workshop/>.

¹⁶⁴*American Leadership in the Asia Pacific, Part 5: The Asia Reassurance Initiative Act: Testimony before the Subcommittee on East Asia, The Pacific, and International Cybersecurity Policy, Senate, 115th Cong. (2018)*, accessed 20 May 2018, <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/hearings/american-leadership-in-the-asia-pacific-part-5-the-asia-reassurance-initiative-act-051518>.

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