

THE UNITED STATES' INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

CHARMAINE MISALUCHA-WILLOUGHBY, Ph.D.



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Executive Summary

In 2017, U.S. President Donald Trump announced a new Indo-Pacific security strategy of fortifying partnerships in the region. The strategy advocates a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), the crux of which is the active participation of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (or Quad, which includes the U.S. alongside Japan, Australia, and India). As such, the strategy presupposes strategic convergence amongst the members of the Quad in terms of what “free and open” and “Indo-Pacific” mean. However, while the Quad values a rules-based international order, each member has different sets of mechanisms towards achieving that end. This is indicative of the members’ preference to be independent of a U.S.-led umbrella. It is precisely the ambiguities surrounding the FOIP that pose two problems for Southeast Asia.

First, the ambiguities surrounding the strategy engender an uneven reception by Southeast Asian countries like Singapore, the Philippines, and Indonesia. These three are broadly representative of the various positions of Southeast Asian countries vis-à-vis the United States. Arguably, the variegated responses to the Indo-Pacific strategy are because their bilateral relationships with the US differ in terms of degree and scope. Still, this is problematic because, on one hand, Southeast Asian states will not be able to maximize the benefits of what the Indo-Pacific strategy offers, and on the other hand, without Southeast Asian support, the longevity of the strategy is thrown into question.

Second, a free and open Indo-Pacific likewise poses a problem for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). This shift in strategic thinking from the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific is largely due to the added element of India and the need to include it in the fold, so to speak, to contain China. Interestingly, while India is cautious about the implications of the

Quad, it also realizes that its relationship with ASEAN can be improved. Ultimately, the American pivot to India implies a pivot away from Southeast Asia and poses a direct hit to ASEAN centrality.

The paper concludes by identifying strategies to strengthen the conceptualization of the FOIP and thereby make it resonate more with Southeast Asia. These include broadening the scope of the strategy and improving the U.S.' bilateral relations. In addition, the set of recommendations confronts the waning role of ASEAN and the need for new types of arrangements, not least of which are minilaterals, to address shifting regional realities.



CHARMAINE MISALUCHA-WILLOUGHBY, Ph.D. is Associate Professor in the International Studies Department of De La Salle University and program convener at the Asia Pacific Pathways to Progress in Manila, Philippines. Her areas of specialization are ASEAN's external relations, security cooperation, and critical international relations theory. She was a joint fellow in the Institute of East Asian Studies and the Käte Hamburger Kolleg Centre for Global Cooperation Research at the University of Duisburg-Essen in Germany, an advanced security cooperation fellow (ASC15-2) at the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies in Honolulu, a visiting research fellow under a Japan Foundation grant in the Osaka School of International Public Policy at Osaka University in Japan, and a recipient of the inaugural US-ASEAN Fulbright Program in the School of International Service at American University in Washington, DC. She received her PhD from the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at the Nanyang Technological University in Singapore.

The United States' Indo-Pacific Strategy and Southeast Asia

Charmaine Misalucha-Willoughby, Ph.D.

Introduction

In 2017, U.S. President Donald Trump announced a new Indo-Pacific security strategy of fortifying partnerships in the region. The strategy advocates a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), the crux of which is the active participation of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (or Quad, which includes the U.S. alongside Japan, Australia, and India). As such, the strategy presupposes strategic convergence amongst the members of the Quad in terms of what “free and open” and “Indo-Pacific” mean. However, while the Quad values a rules-based international order, each member has in place different sets of mechanisms towards achieving that end. This is indicative of the members’ preference to be independent of a U.S.-led umbrella. It is precisely the ambiguities surrounding the FOIP that poses two problems for Southeast Asia.

First, the ambiguities surrounding the strategy engender an uneven reception by Southeast Asian countries like Singapore, the Philippines, and Indonesia. These three constitute the various positions of Southeast Asian countries vis-à-vis the United States. Singapore has proved to be a consistent strategic partner and conduit of the U.S. The two have a strong record in security cooperation on issues ranging from counterterrorism to maritime security. Singapore also hosts a U.S. Navy logistics command

unit that coordinates regional operations. Hence, Singapore can offer tangible support to the effective implementation of the Indo-Pacific strategy. The Philippines, meanwhile, has an ambivalent stance towards the newly packaged strategy: on one hand is Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte's pursuit of an independent foreign policy and the recent pivot to China, and on the other is the business-as-usual attitude of U.S.-Philippine security relations. Indonesia subscribes to a different formulation of the Indo-Pacific strategy altogether, one that is not hinged on containing China. The Indonesian model predates the American version and revolves around the ideas of inclusivity and neutrality. Arguably, Southeast Asian states' responses to the Indo-Pacific strategy vary because their bilateral relationships with the U.S. differ in terms of degree and scope. Nonetheless, the variegated levels and responses are problematic for both sides: Southeast Asian states would not be able to maximize the benefits of what the Indo-Pacific strategy offers, and without Southeast Asian support, the longevity of the strategy is thrown into question. In this regard, the paper examines U.S. plans and actions for the realization of the Indo-Pacific strategy and their implications to the above-mentioned Southeast Asian states.

Second, a free and open Indo-Pacific likewise poses a problem for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). This shift in strategic thinking from the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific is largely due to the added element of India and the need to include it in the fold, so to speak, to contain China. Interestingly, while India is cautious about the implications of the Quad, it also realizes that its relationship with ASEAN, while longstanding, can be improved. The ASEAN-India relationship is anchored in dialogue relations and in the East Asia Summit. Hence, including India in the Quad adds another layer of complexity in ASEAN-India relations. Ultimately, the problem is that the American pivot *to* India implies a pivot *away* from Southeast Asia. This poses a direct hit to ASEAN centrality, especially considering U.S. President Barack Obama's policy of rebalance a few years back, which placed the region right in the middle of America's Asia strategy. Against this backdrop, the paper offers a prescriptive – rather than a predictive

– analysis of the interplay of ASEAN, the Indo-Pacific Strategy, and China's influential role in the region.

The paper concludes by identifying strategies to strengthen the conceptualization of the FOIP and thereby make it resonate more with Southeast Asia. These include broadening the scope of the strategy and improving the U.S.' bilateral relations. In addition, the set of recommendations confronts the waning role of ASEAN and the need for new types of arrangements, not least of which are minilaterals, to address shifting regional realities.

The Indo-Pacific Strategy and the Quad

The FOIP is the United States' current Asia policy. It first gained ground during U.S. President Donald Trump's inaugural five-country Asia tour in 2017 and was given more clarity during the 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue. "Free" means freedom from coercion in the international level and the freedom to pursue good governance in the national level in terms of protecting and upholding fundamental rights, transparency, and anti-corruption. "Open" refers to sea lines of communication and airways, on one hand, and infrastructure, trade, and investment, on the other. In short, the U.S. approach to the Indo-Pacific has at its core a focus on three areas: security, economics, and governance.

While the articulation of such an approach or strategy is welcome, several points need careful attention. First, in terms of security, the pursuit of a free and open Indo-Pacific rests on championing not only an interdependent and interconnected vision of the world, but also a rules-based international order. While not discounting that Quad members put a premium on the same goals and values, the FOIP presupposes strategic convergence amongst the four states. This might have been the case were it not for China's economic dynamism and influence. In fact, China is India's most important trading partner, while Australia remains the second largest recipient of accumulated Chinese investment with U.S.\$99 billion since 2008.¹ Japan's aging population constrains it to be similarly dependent on

China's growth. These economic links constitute the Quad members' hesitation against the FOIP.

Second, these deep economic linkages are arguably the impetus for the reframing of the FOIP from its original focus on security to the recalibrated incarnation involving the economic sphere. The updated version emphasizes that enhancing shared prosperity rests on creating partnerships, building momentum in energy, infrastructure, and digital economy, and tapping the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation to grow economic partnerships and strengthen people-to-people connections.² An alternative explanation to the recalibration is that a security-focused initiative is likely seen as a way of containing China. However, the focus on economics likewise raises a question, specifically on how this component works relative to other initiatives in the region, e.g., China's Belt and Road Initiative. Also, how can the strong encouragement for regionalization and the focus on individual sector-specific efforts be sustained in light of the U.S.' protectionist tendencies?

Finally, the conflation of the FOIP and the Quad may only be skin deep. This comes on the heels of suggestions to shelve the Quad. U.S. Indo-Pacific Command's Admiral Phil Davidson observed that the region's reception to the Quad was lukewarm and that "there wasn't an immediate potential" for it.³ While his remarks might have been taken out of context and blown out of proportion, this is nonetheless symptomatic of the disconnect between the FOIP and its operationalization via the Quad. It is precisely these ambiguities, i.e., in terms of the security-economics nexus and the intersection of the FOIP and the Quad, that diminish the potential impact of the U.S.' Asia strategy. These conceptual ambiguities spill over to the individual Southeast Asian states, particularly Singapore, the Philippines, and Indonesia, and their respective bilateral relationships with the U.S. Similarly, the vagueness of the FOIP raises the issue of ASEAN's role in the U.S.' Asia strategy.

The Indo-Pacific Strategy and Southeast Asian States

The overarching goals of the FOIP are clear: to reinforce the rules-based international order, to promote a liberal trading regime and freedom of navigation, and to provide mutual security assurances. Their operationalization, however, is received differently amongst Southeast Asian states. Three states are analyzed here- Singapore, the Philippines, and Indonesia-primarily because they represent polarized sentiments towards the U.S. and hence towards the FOIP.

Singapore

China-Singapore relations have been stable since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1990. Singapore has always followed the “one China” policy and it is also the largest foreign investor in China at U.S.\$5.8 billion into over 700 projects in 2014.⁴ Likewise, Singapore is the largest investment destination for Chinese companies investing abroad.⁵ To mark 25 years of diplomatic relations, both sides signed the All-Round Cooperative Partnership Progressing with the Times in 2015.

The relationship, however, took a plunge in 2016.⁶ While Singapore is not a claimant in the South China Sea dispute, it recognizes that the rule of law is key to its survival. It has one of the biggest ports in the region and its prosperity hinges on its role as a free port in the Straits of Malacca. Hence, any dispute over the South China Sea and freedom of navigation translates to operational costs to Singapore. It is in this context that Singapore showed support for the arbitration ruling in favor of the Philippines and called for a more active role for ASEAN. This annoyed China, but more so when in September, Singapore allegedly attempted to insert the ruling in the final document of the Non-Aligned Movement summit. In addition, Hong Kong customs impounded nine Singapore Armed Forces armored personnel carriers in transit from Taiwan in November.

Meanwhile, U.S.-Singapore relations have become closer with the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement in 2015, which upgrades the existing strategic partnership between the two.⁷ The broad framework for

defense cooperation lies in five key areas, which include the military, policy, strategic, and technology spheres, as well as cooperation against non-conventional security challenges. The agreement also identified enhanced cooperation in the areas of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, cyber defense, biosecurity, and public communications. Aside from these, the two sides also introduced new high-level dialogues between their respective defense establishments. These various commitments in different areas of cooperation translate to the deployment of the U.S. Navy's P-8A Poseidon aircraft to Singapore, which is alarming for China because these can be used for maritime surveillance patrols over the South China Sea.

Singapore's role is especially complex, and it is not a simple choice between the U.S. and China.⁸ Not only is the small city-state geographically located between much bigger neighbors (Malaysia and Indonesia), but Southeast Asian's experience in Indochina in 1975 and Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia in 1978 solidified Singapore's inclination towards a more active American role as security guarantor of the region.⁹ At the same time, Singapore realizes that "...it will need to maintain a careful balance to simultaneously develop a closer relationship with China".¹⁰

Philippines

The U.S.-Philippine alliance is founded on the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty and the 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement, which provides for the U.S. to rotate forward-deployment forces in Philippine territory and for extensive access to Philippine military facilities. The Philippines' longstanding pro-U.S. stance was, however, challenged with the election of President Rodrigo Duterte whose external relations are oftentimes described as a turn to pragmatism, which is in line with the country's pursuit of an "independent foreign policy."¹¹ This is evidenced primarily by its downplaying of the Permanent Court of Arbitration's 2016 award in favor of the Philippines.¹² Along the same lines, the Philippines announced in the ASEAN summit in Laos in September 2016 that its navy would no longer join U.S. Navy patrols in the disputed areas in the South China Sea. Philippine Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana declared that the

Philippines would most likely discontinue assisting the U.S. military's freedom of navigation patrols in the South China Sea. Furthermore, the Philippines likewise called for the withdrawal of U.S. forces supporting the Philippine Army's counter-terrorism missions in Mindanao. Most recently, calls for reviewing the Mutual Defense Treaty have been strong.

Accompanying this pivot away from the U.S. is a pivot towards China. In December 2016 when China was reportedly installing weapons on disputed islands within the Philippines' exclusive economic zone, the Philippines expressed that it would not lodge any protests because as former Foreign Secretary Perfecto Yasay Jr. put it, the Philippines was helpless to put a stop to China's militarization of the islands. This pivot away from the U.S. and towards China, however, was met with some resistance from the Department of Defense and the Armed Forces of the Philippines. Instead of downgrading the alliance, Duterte decided to continue joint military exercises with the U.S., but they were now more focused on non-traditional security issues like rapid response to natural calamities, humanitarian issues, and cybersecurity.¹³

The Duterte government's desecuritization of the South China Sea issue has the potential for success, albeit relative and perhaps only for the short term.¹⁴ This is because the Philippines' pivot to China differentiates the maritime issues from the broader economic relations of the two countries. Doing so allows the Philippines to achieve several goals, not least of which is that Filipino fisherfolks were able to return to their normal fishing activities around Scarborough despite being under the watch of the Chinese Coast Guard. Chinese pledges of major fund infusions for Philippine infrastructure development reflect the Philippines' strategy of diversifying its relations. As a result, China now sees the Philippines as a welcome partner in the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Belt and Road Initiative. Ultimately, these can make China more open to signing an ASEAN Code of Conduct.

Despite the new inclination of Philippine foreign policy, U.S.-Philippine security relations continue as usual. In mid-2018, the two sides set up a new training activity codenamed *Sama-Sama* that continued many of the

engagements that both sides carried out in the past, with the addition of air defense, search and rescue at sea, shore phase symposiums, and seminars on explosive ordinance disposal and anti-submarine and surface operations.¹⁵ The two countries also organized a coordinated patrol in the Sulu Sea. By September 2018, Defense Secretary Lorenzana went on an official visit to Washington for the Annual Mutual Defense Board-Security Engagement Board Meeting. During the meeting, the two countries agreed on 281 security cooperation activities for 2019, including counter-terrorism, maritime security, cyber security, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief.¹⁶ These engagements indicate that the alliance remains intact at strategic and operational levels.¹⁷ U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's assurance during his Manila visit in March 2019, that any armed attack on the Philippines in the South China Sea will trigger treaty obligations, demonstrates that the alliance is alive and well.¹⁸

Indonesia

Indonesia has its own version of the Indo-Pacific concept, which is based on the principles of being "open, transparent, and inclusive."¹⁹ It promotes the "habit of dialogue, cooperation, and friendship," and aims to uphold international law. Indonesia's version of Indo-Pacific cooperation hinges on ASEAN unity and centrality as it assumes the creation of an environment that respects international law, promotes dialogue and the peaceful settlement of disputes, and avoids the threat of or the actual use of force. In this conception, ASEAN is called upon to address transnational security challenges like terrorism, drug trafficking, human trafficking, and piracy. In the economic sphere, it is also up to ASEAN to create "new economic growth centers" in the Indian and South Pacific Oceans through "an open and fair economic system".²⁰

The significance of advancing this vision not only boosts ASEAN centrality, but it also solidifies Indonesia's role as the unofficial leader of ASEAN.²¹ At the same time, the Indo-Pacific vision reinforces Indonesia's self-image as a maritime power. Indeed, President Joko Widodo's goal is of transforming Indonesia into a Global Maritime Fulcrum. One can also

make the argument that Indonesia's narrative of collaboration instead of competition distinguishes itself from great power politics.

There are several factors that underpin Indonesia's advancement of Indo-Pacific cooperation. On one hand, U.S.-Indonesia relations, while good, have some limitations. Military-to-military relations are described as "genuinely warm" due primarily to sanctions being lifted and to counter-terrorist cooperation being substantial and effective.²² People-to-people relations have also significantly improved through educational exchanges. However, U.S.-Indonesia relations are limited in that Indonesia consistently refused to join the U.S.-led Proliferation Security Initiative, which is a coalition against weapons of mass destruction.²³ Indonesia reasons that interdicting or allowing other countries to interdict vessels or aircraft in and over Indonesian waters will undermine its sovereignty and violate the terms of the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea. At the same time, Indonesia is suspicious of U.S. domination herein.²⁴

Another factor that contributes to Indonesia's own version of the Indo-Pacific concept is its relations with China. The status quo in Indonesia's policymaking circles is twofold: to ride the waves of close relations with China and to preserve its strategic autonomy within Southeast Asia.²⁵ This "non-balancing act" towards China, however, holds the latter goal hostage. Bureaucratic politics and divisions within the country's elite, not to mention Jokowi's "courtship" of Chinese state-owned enterprises and private investors to improve Indonesia's poor connectivity and energy infrastructure, are symptomatic of "half-measure" policies.²⁶ Adding to the complexity is the presidential election in April 2019 which drew attention to candidates' nationalist credentials.

In sum, the Indo-Pacific strategy is met by an uneven reception in Singapore, the Philippines, and Indonesia. Singapore comparatively has the closest relationship with the United States at this point. Its strategic partnership with the U.S. enables it to offer tangible support to the implementation of the Indo-Pacific strategy. At the same time, however, Singapore also realizes that it must carefully balance its closeness with one great power so as not to upset its relations with another, i.e., China. This

puts Singapore in a rather tight spot. Meanwhile, the Philippines used to have a very close relationship with the U.S., until, that is, the plot twist that is Duterte's foreign policy. Still, there is a lot of comfort to be had in knowing that the fundamental aspects of U.S.-Philippine relations remain intact. The United States can then rest assured that the Indo-Pacific strategy can move forward, knowing that it is business-as-usual with its ally despite the overarching pronouncements of the current administration. Finally, Indonesia advocates its own version of Indo-Pacific, one that is not as exclusive as the American version. However, a complicating factor is the 2019 election, which put a spotlight on candidates' commercial links to China. These three cases demonstrate that the Indo-Pacific strategy needs more fine tuning to accommodate the specific circumstances of Southeast Asia. Similar challenges are embedded at the regional level.

The Indo-Pacific Strategy and ASEAN

As the U.S.' Indo-Pacific strategy remains vague beyond the catchphrase "free and open Indo-Pacific," ASEAN is agnostic towards it.²⁷ In the ASEAN Foreign Ministers Retreat in February 2018, the talks proved inconclusive on the subject. There continued to be no progress on clarifying the concept in the ASEAN-Australia Summit in March 2018. By the end of the month, Indonesia hosted a Track 1.5 workshop to further discuss it, but other than emphasizing that the concept should be more inclusive, no further discussions on the matter were made. This ambiguity is perhaps understandable, given that the great powers themselves, i.e., the Quad, do not have a common understanding of the concept, much less its implementation. Absent that delineation, ASEAN's role and centrality hang in the balance.

For ASEAN, the choice is not simply either the U.S. or China.²⁸ To insist on this binary is to undervalue the regional realities taking place today, not least is the fact that for many of the ASEAN states, the choice is being – or has already been – made. A prime example of this is Cambodia, and to a certain extent, the Philippines. Additionally, another set of dynamics is in place in the region, including a lack of definitive direction that only a

regional leader can set. This is a challenge that is internal to ASEAN. Externally, one must also consider that ASEAN has a range of dialogue partners with whom the regional organization must likewise maintain positive relations. Some of these partners are also members of the Quad, such as Japan, Australia, and India. Japan is keen on promoting infrastructure development in ASEAN, while Australia is set on playing a more active role in regional affairs, and India has expressed stepping up efforts in terms of defense ties with ASEAN countries. These relationships are no less important than ASEAN's ties with either the U.S. or China. Hence, the Indo-Pacific strategy needs to account for ASEAN's diversified set of relations as a function of its strategic options. A blanket concept will translate to ambiguity regarding ASEAN's role.

Conclusion

This paper explored the nuanced implications of the U.S.' Indo-Pacific strategy to Southeast Asian states and to ASEAN. It was argued that the ambiguities of the FOIP pose problems for both the state and regional levels of analysis. One way to lessen the ambiguities of the FOIP is for the U.S. to remain consistent in its bilateral relations with allies and partners and the region. The U.S. likewise needs to achieve policy convergence in terms of the objectives of the FOIP and the Quad, and how the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act can further these objectives. Ultimately, however, the U.S.' Asia policy hinges on its China policy and its bilateral relations with China. The alignment of these policies will render the FOIP more successful.

Of the three Southeast Asian countries considered in this paper, the Philippines is in a unique position, because it is the only U.S. treaty ally in the mix. While there are calls from the Philippine defense sector to review the alliance, this has yet to gain traction in the country's foreign affairs and diplomacy circles. Indeed, while the Department of National Defense called to review the Mutual Defense Treaty, the Department of Foreign Affairs appears reluctant to open what may be a Pandora's box. Until the defense and foreign affairs communities sing the same tune, the Philippines will be unable to reap the benefits of the FOIP.

One way for the U.S., ASEAN, and Southeast Asian countries to take advantage of the FOIP is to create minilateral regimes.²⁹ Minilaterals are often subsumed under a broader framework of multilateralism. Where they differ, however, is in terms of their targeted and issue-specific focus.³⁰ For example, the Indomalphi Trilateral Maritime Patrol was launched in 2016 as a form of security cooperation between Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. The rationale behind this arrangement is that bilateralism is now unable to face up to a wide range of security challenges.³¹ Hence, minilateralism can complement state-to-state efforts, as well as arrangements currently in place at the ASEAN level. As targeted and issue-specific arrangements, various minilateral arrangements can involve one, both, or neither of the great powers. These do not necessarily weaken ASEAN; on the contrary, minilateral arrangements can confront ASEAN on the need for sustained and institutionalized regimes to address regional challenges.

Cooperation among a small number of countries, after all, may prove to be more effective in addressing current regional realities. Minilateralism can be an alternative to the hub-and-spokes model that forms the backbone of the U.S.' alliance system and the recently revived Quadrilateral Security Dialogue. Minilateralism can likewise offer a narrative of collaboration instead of competition. Indeed, the Trilateral Cooperative Arrangement can become one of Southeast Asia's security regimes.³² Ultimately, it is in minilateralism that ASEAN can keep its central role in regional affairs and at the same time ride the waves of both the U.S.' Indo-Pacific strategy and China's Belt and Road Initiative. Minilateralism, in short, spells Southeast Asia's way of managing great power relations.

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ASIA PACIFIC PATHWAYS TO PROGRESS
FOUNDATION, INC.

 UNIT 17E ONE BURGUNDY PLAZA, 307 KATIPUNAN AVENUE,
BARANGAY LOYOLA HEIGHTS, QUEZON CITY, PHILIPPINES 1108



(+632) 8251-6793



contact@appfi.ph



appfi.ph



@appfi_ph