



The harbour of Hong Kong

Preventing Chinese dominance in Asia

The United States' Indo-Pacific Strategy

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There is transatlantic agreement that the “China challenge” is the most serious we face; but do we have a strategy to confront it? Whether in business or in geopolitics, strategy is a three-step process – first, setting a focused objective; second, mapping out a set of mutually reinforcing choices that will accomplish it; third, marshaling the resources to carry it out. But it is also a competitive process – objectives can be shared among rivals, and strategies bested or copied. The winner is often the party which is more disciplined in executing its strategy, and has superior resources to do so.

Global goals versus regional strategies

The US, UK, France, Germany, and Canada have all published Indo-Pacific strategies, reflecting the region’s importance to their interests. They have much in common – laying out ambitions to strengthen the international order, promote prosperity, and combat climate change, among other goals. However, there is little about these documents that is particular to the Indo-Pacific. Climate change is not an Asian phenomenon, nor is it the region harboring the most transnational threats. Indeed, one could simply replace “Indo-Pacific” with another region and the documents would be equally applicable. Rather than regional strategies, these are listings of global goals, all of which must be pursued locally and regionally, including in the Indo-Pacific. What is unique about the Indo-Pacific is the chief obstacle to advancing these goals. As the US strategy notes, the “intensifying American focus [on the Indo-Pacific] is due in part to

the fact that the Indo-Pacific faces mounting challenges, particularly from the PRC [People’s Republic of China]. The PRC is combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological might as it pursues a sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific and seeks to become the world’s most influential power.” That is to say, China has both the ambition and increasingly the capability to establish regional hegemony in Asia. The US objective, plainly stated, is to prevent it. This is the American aim because Chinese dominance in Asia would threaten US interests there, threaten democracy and free-market capitalism, and perhaps presage a broader contest for global influence recalling the Cold War.

Preventing the regional hegemony of China

Transatlantic Indo-Pacific strategy should focus squarely on that challenge – not to the exclusion of pursuing goals, but in recognition that failing would limit our ability to do so. Our strategy should consist of the following mutually reinforcing actions.

Defending Taiwan

A key focus of American strategy in the Indo-Pacific has become the defense of Taiwan. The seizure of Taiwan by the PRC would threaten US interests and be the likeliest flashpoint for a US-China conflict that would inflict enormous costs on the world. Thus, US strategy begins with deterring such a conflict – first by repositioning US forces in the region to establish deterrence by denial, and in the longer term by expanding



and modernizing US military forces to disabuse the PRC of any hope of military victory and further bolster deterrence.

Reducing Beijing's leverage over us

But strengthening our own military is insufficient; three supporting lines of action are needed. Strategies are competitive – the PRC is executing its own strategy as we pursue our own, and will adapt to our actions and exploit our weaknesses. In recognition of this, the US and Europe must first ensure our commercial sectors are not helping the PRC to advance its own capabilities; second, reduce Beijing's leverage over us, both by shielding key supply chains from Chinese capture as well as by addressing other forms of PRC influence in our societies; and third, urge regional allies to take parallel steps, and strengthen regional mechanisms like the Quad, AUKUS, and ASEAN.

Expanding our diplomatic and economic role

If, as it must, deterrence succeeds, the primary theaters of US-China competition will be non-military. To this end, Washington must play an expanded diplomatic and economic role in the Indo-Pacific. While more remains to be done diplomatically, the most glaring gap in US engagement is economic – while the PRC has moved ahead with its Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership and US allies have inaugurated the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership, the US is absent when it comes to setting the region's economic agenda. The disastrous decision to admit the PRC to the WTO has helped convince Americans that trade agreements benefit our adversaries. Today, however, it is our absence from economic diplomacy that aids our rivals, leaving Beijing with less competition and our partners without our support.

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The American strategy must reach beyond

As it seeks to bolster its regional and global positions, China has looked outside Asia for advantage by expanding its military presence, investing in industries such as mineral extraction, and building leverage over other states. Beijing understands that while any crisis with the United States may center on Asia, its outcome will depend in part on what transpires elsewhere, whether in terms of access to resources and sea lanes or the formation of diplomatic coalitions. Our strategy too must look beyond the Indo-Pacific.

As a well-established power, the US has an advantage in any global competition. We must strike a balance between preserving this advantage and making difficult tradeoffs elsewhere in order to devote the necessary attention and resources to the Indo-Pacific. This would be true even with increases in the US defense budget, which have so far proven elusive. In regions outside Asia, this will mean an increased emphasis on burden-sharing, increased acceptance of “aligned autonomy” from allies, and greater emphasis on prioritization and great-power competition in regional strategies.

This need to prioritize portends a time of friction with US partners, as Washington asks them both to work with it in addressing global threats, while at the same time asking them to invest more in their own capabilities and act more decisively in their neighborhoods. In the long run, however, the shift may prove a boon, as states like Saudi Arabia and India find that they prefer being approached as a partner in US policy rather than the object of it. Scarcity may also spur innovation, for example in the increased use of uncrewed vehicles and artificial intelligence in place of capital assets needed in the Indo-Pacific.

A free and open Indo-Pacific

US partners often complain that they do not wish to choose between Washington and Beijing. But they are not being asked to do so. While the US aims to prevent Chinese hegemony in the Indo-Pacific, it does not seek to establish its own. Rather, Washington subscribes instead to a vision articulated by late Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe – of a free and open Indo-Pacific. This is the choice before states – an order where every state is equally sovereign and relations are conducted according to norms that

are fundamentally fair, or one divided into spheres of influence where some are more sovereign than others. This is not a choice the US has imposed, but one that has arisen inexorably alongside the PRC. ■



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