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ABSTRACT

There is no dearth in analyses that sound the alarm on the current United States (US) administration's policy in the Indo-Pacific. This paper conducts an evaluation of the US' engagement in the region, and finds it to be contrary to alarmist predictions. President Donald Trump's administration has reaffirmed commitments towards traditional allies, built on the predecessor president's courtship of nascent partners, and encouraged partners to be more vocal with their policy positions. Moreover, as an exception to the president's 'America First' rhetoric, his administration has embraced development finance and multilateralism to promote the development of regional infrastructure. It has also worked to bridge the destinies of the Indian and Pacific oceans by resolving policy divergences with India and supporting the latter's capacity-building in the naval domain. As it reorients US national security around 'great-power competition', the paper notes, the Trump administration has put China under pressure on multiple fronts.

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INTRODUCTION

Donald Trump's 2016 victory and his 'America First' prescription for US foreign policy raised the spectre of an era of American isolationism when US rivalry with China had begun to go beyond the peculiarities of Chinese trade practices, its territorial aggrandisement in the South China Sea, and its rising regional influence with projects like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Concerns over the future of US foreign policy emerged particularly with respect to preceding President Barack Obama's 'Pivot', later renamed 'Rebalance', to the Asia-Pacific—where the US aimed to assert itself as a Pacific power and consolidate America's defense, diplomatic, and economic ties in the region.¹

To be sure, Trump's comments while on his campaign trail in 2016 did indicate that he was undermining the US' strategic edge in the region: he spoke of reducing US commitments towards allies Japan and South Korea which form the cornerstone of the "hub & spokes" alliance system in the region,² and at one point suggested that Tokyo and Seoul acquire their own nuclear weapons instead of relying on the US' security umbrella.³ Trump's antagonism against China invited pundits to express fear that his administration would exacerbate the already "daunting challenge" of Washington's relations with Beijing.⁴ He also openly dismissed multilateralism, rallying against the Obama administration's Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).⁵

Three days after being sworn in, Trump put into action some of his 'America First' prescriptions and withdrew the US from the TPP. His administration also announced the imposition of steel and aluminium tariffs on a range of nations—including China, Japan, Australia and Taiwan in the region—with no apparent distinction between friends and foes. Trump also undercut allies like South Korea by initiating direct negotiations with North Korea.

Overall, nearly one term into his presidency, Trump's record in the Indo-Pacific region has been mixed. There are evident points of continuity: further cultivating strategic partnerships in the region, consolidating the predecessor administration's vision in the region by announcing the Indo-Pacific strategy, and complementing its approach with an economic vision for the region.

ENDING THE DISSONANCE IN US' CHINA POLICY

Armed with a definitive political mandate to confront China, the Trump administration has ended the apparent incongruity in US policy. In its populist takeover of the Republican Party, the Trump campaign had effectively linked Americans' socio-cultural anxieties to the US political elites' expedience on free trade. In rallying against the political establishment's post-Cold War bipartisanship on free trade, Trump alleged that foreign countries have "taken advantage" of the US.⁶ He blamed this for harming American interests in the industrial mid-West, and focused on the US-China dynamic to underscore the US' trade deficit of over US\$ 350 billion with China at that time. In making China a centrepiece of its narrative, the Trump campaign alleged that past US policymakers have been complicit in the US' "managed decline" in exchange for commercial interests with China.⁷

There could be some degree of truth in Trump's vilification of his predecessors. In the late 1990s, US lawmakers rallied around a bipartisan effort to tap into the massive potential of China's market, ahead of the latter's liberal reforms. For instance, China's entry in to the World Trade Organization (WTO)⁸ was preceded by the overturning of the *Jackson-Vanik Amendment* to the 1974 Trade Act, which provided for an annual review of the US' 'Most-Favored-Nation' status for China on account of its progress (or lack of it) on civil liberties and human rights issues.⁹ To cultivate China as a "responsible

stakeholder”,¹⁰ the Permanent Normal Trade Relations (PNTR) legislation put an end to the “annual ritual of reviewing China’s trade status.”¹¹

Such bipartisan effort—which occurred throughout the Bill Clinton and George W. Bush years—over time also dampened US insistence on China implementing liberal economic reforms. Although the Clinton and Bush administrations imposed certain anti-dumping duties on China, they failed to coax corrective measures from it, possibly out of fear of losing US companies’ access to the lucrative market.¹² As a result, China gradually became the world’s second-largest economy and the largest trading partner of most of the world’s industrialised nations — all whilst continuing to peg its currency at artificially low levels, incentivising state-owned entities, and necessitating technological transfers from foreign companies operating in China. Through the years, a lack of harmony in the US’ approach to China then became apparent, over the right degree of cooperation on the economic front and confrontation on the threats it began to pose to US primacy.

As it placed China at the centre of its 2016 campaign, the Trump administration has had the latitude for more overt confrontation. The Trump administration’s inaugural draft of the National Security Strategy (NSS) announced the reemergence of “great power competition”.¹³ In the document, the US deemed China and Russia to be “fielding military capabilities designed to deny America access in times of crisis and to contest our ability to operate freely in critical commercial zones during peacetime. In short, they are contesting our geopolitical advantages and trying to change the international order in their favor.”¹⁴ Beyond such an outright acknowledgement of the threat posed by China, Trump’s confrontational posture has since manifested in three domains, which will be discussed in the succeeding sections.

1. Weaponising the trade deficit

With China, Trump put to test his hypothesis of “trade wars are good, and easy to win.”¹⁵ Following his administration’s March 2018 imposition of a 25-percent tariff on steel and a 10-percent tariff on aluminium, China imposed tariffs of up to 25 percent on 128 American products, from aircraft to soybeans. Subsequently, all through 2018 and 2019 — apart from some brief episodes of mutually agreed ceasefires like in December 2018 and August 2019, both sides repeatedly raised the stakes in their trade war.¹⁶

US actions were often met with proportional retaliations: the US’ August 2018 list of US\$ 16 billion worth of Chinese goods tariffed at 25 percent was met with China’s own set of US\$ 16-billion worth of American goods with 25 percent duties. At times, Trump, seeing an opportunity for the US to close its trade deficit, expanded the scope and announced 10 percent tariffs on US\$ 300-billion worth of Chinese imports. Eventually, the US targeted US\$ 360-billion worth of Chinese goods, far more than China’s retaliation on US\$ 110-billion worth of American products.¹⁷

The tariffs yielded counterintuitive results for the US —some US manufacturers bore the brunt of the tariffs from both ends, and producers struggled as China curtailed imports. Yet, the Trump administration continued with its approach. For instance, America’s total agricultural exports to China fell from US\$ 24 billion in 2014 to US\$ 9.1 billion in 2019,¹⁸ and at one point even warranted an intervention from the Trump administration with farmer bailouts of nearly US\$ 30 billion.¹⁹ After 18 months of such tensions, in late 2019, the US and China announced a breakthrough in their trade negotiations. Although the deal had little to say on structural reforms of China’s state-owned enterprises or forced transfer of technology, the

‘Phase One’ agreement saw China giving assurances that it will raise imports “of American goods and services by at least \$200 billion” over the next two years to narrow the trade imbalance.²⁰ On agricultural goods, the agreement opened the possibility of additional US exports of \$12.5 billion in 2020 and \$19.5 billion in 2021.²¹ Other commitments included US\$ 54 billion in energy purchases, US\$ 78 billion in manufacturing purchases, and US\$ 38 billion in services.²²

2. Normalising US FONOPS

In early 2017, the Trump administration deliberated on “a full-year schedule of when US navy ships will sail through contested waters in the South China Sea.”²³ According to then Defence Secretary James Mattis, the aim was to plan US Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPS), so that requests for the same are not impeded by tardy processes in the chain of command. This meant a departure from the US conducting such operations as a “one-off event” or being seen as mere retaliatory measures to Chinese actions.²⁴ As a result, in contrast to about half-a-dozen FONOPS under Obama, the Trump administration by mid-2019 had already conducted more visits to the South China Sea.²⁵

Eventually, it conducted more FONOPS in 2019 than “in any year since the U.S. began more aggressively challenging China’s claims in the South China Sea in 2015.”²⁶ Against the Obama years’ two FONOPS in 2015 and three in 2016, the Trump administration conducted six in 2017, five in 2018, and nine in 2019.²⁷ Moreover, even amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, as China announced administrative jurisdictions over the militarised islands, the US conducted FONOPS under the Pentagon strategy of “strategic predictability, operational unpredictability.”²⁸ The Trump administration’s approach to FONOPS,

therefore, has not been limited to reactionary measures that seek to change Chinese behaviour. Rather, the aim has been to ensure that the FONOPs are not construed “as noteworthy events, but more as a fact of life in the South China Sea — a reminder of the U.S. Navy’s forward presence in the area and its commitment to freedom of navigation.”²⁹

3. Combatting China’s technological primacy

In 2020, China became the top applicant for patents at the World Intellectual Property Organisation, ending the US’ monopoly of the top spot since 1978.³⁰ Indeed, China’s applications increased 200-fold over 20 years, with Huawei Technologies being the largest corporate patent filer for the last three years.³¹ As a result of which, Huawei has become the world’s biggest manufacturer of telecommunications equipment. Moreover, with regards to the next frontier of telecommunications, i.e. 5G network, Huawei today stands as the only end-to-end equipment producer.

Recognising the security implications of China exercising such control on the world’s 5G network, the Trump administration initiated a global campaign to warn countries against permitting Huawei to establish their 5G infrastructure. Referring to a 2017 Chinese intelligence law that mandates companies to cooperate with the state intelligence apparatus, the Trump administration led the way by decreasing interlinkages between its own enterprises and Huawei. In 2019, Huawei was placed on a trade blacklist, banning it from doing business with US firms, which also meant it could not “buy hardware components like semiconductors or access critical software such as Google services on Android.”³² Further, the Department of Justice announced indictments against Huawei for “instituting a bonus program to reward employees who obtained confidential information from competitors.”³³ The Federal Communications Commission (FCC)

also classified Huawei as a “national security threat” and barred US telecommunications companies from using FCC funds to purchase equipment from it.³⁴ In search of alternatives for its domestic needs and those of the world, Attorney General William Barr also suggested US ownership of other companies like Finland’s Nokia and Sweden’s Ericsson.³⁵ Lastly, pressure on Huawei continued even after the Phase One deal, with the May 2020 Commerce Department’s announcement of preventing “companies around the world from using American-made machinery and software to design or produce chips for Huawei or its entities.”³⁶

Such a sustained confrontational posture—as seen in the domains discussed in the preceding paragraphs—has set the momentum for an emergent US bipartisan consensus against China. For instance, the Trump administration’s 2018 round of tariffs garnered support from the House Minority Leader at the time, Nancy Pelosi who said: “The tariffs announced today should be used as a leverage point to negotiate more fair and open trade for U.S. products in China.”³⁷ In February 2020, despite differences on fraying transatlantic ties under Trump, as Speaker of the House, Pelosi urged partner nations in Europe to refrain from allowing Huawei to control their telecommunications market.³⁸ Furthermore, on the UK’s initial decision to permit Huawei in its 5G trails, Democrats not only joined Trump in criticising London, but also threatened the cessation of US-UK intelligence-sharing.³⁹ In addition, the Democrat-led House of Representatives passed a measure to ban the federal government from buying equipment from entities like Huawei, and has sought to institute a US\$ 1-billion program to reduce rural networks’ dependence on Huawei equipment.⁴⁰

The Democrats have also attempted to reinstate a focus on China’s human rights record, and thereby complement Trump’s actions. For example, the Democrat-led House of Representatives has overseen

the passage of measures mandating the US Secretary of State to certify once a year that Hong Kong has enough autonomy to keep its special US trade consideration, barring the sale of items such as tear gas and rubber bullets to Hong Kong police, and requiring China to permit the opening of an American consulate in Tibet before any new Chinese consulate can open in the US.⁴¹ With crucial support from Republicans in the Senate, the Democrat-led House has even steered Trump's policy on China's human rights record. For instance, the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act of 2020 was passed unanimously, mandating the imposition of sanctions against Chinese officials responsible for the internment of Uyghurs in Xinjiang.⁴² There was also the Hong Kong Autonomy Act, which provides for sanctions against Chinese officials involved in the enactment of the regressive security law in Hong Kong.⁴³

The Trump administration's China policy, therefore, apart from being at the core of its policy in the Indo-Pacific region, has set the stage for a renewed American bipartisanship on confronting China.

PARTNERSHIPS AND DEVELOPMENT FINANCE: IMPETUS TO U.S.

Drawing on the predecessor administration's 'Pivot to Asia' policy, the Trump administration has introduced a region-wide agenda with the Indo-Pacific strategy. It has also introduced a normative dimension, to build on the Obama administration's aims that hardly went beyond advocating for the status quo against China's rise. Under the aim of securing a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific', the Trump administration has advocated for a rules-based order imbued with shared values and principles. In what is evidently a contrast to his values-bereft 'America First' worldview, Trump defined the US vision for the region at the

2017 APEC CEO Summit in Vietnam. He construed it as “a place where sovereign and independent nations, with diverse cultures and many different dreams, can all prosper side-by-side, and thrive in freedom and in peace.”⁴⁴

Thereafter, in at least four documents that comprise the Trump administration’s national security literature, the US’ focus on the region has been evident. Its maiden NSS noted: “a geopolitical competition between free and repressive visions of world order is taking place in the Indo-Pacific region.”⁴⁵ Meanwhile, the US State Department’s ‘A Free And Open Indo-Pacific — Advancing a Shared Vision’ report, echoed the Obama administration’s idea of the US being “a Pacific power”, and expanded on the normative aims of the strategy: “The U.S. vision for the Indo-Pacific excludes no nation. We do not ask countries to choose between one partner or another. Instead, we ask that they uphold the core principles of the regional order at a time when these principles are under renewed threat.”⁴⁶ The document also underscored the Trump administration’s economic vision for the region as being aimed to “equip states to resist coercive economic practices, unsustainable debt burdens, and other dangers.”⁴⁷ Furthermore, in an apparent contradiction of Trump’s expressed aversion to foreign aid and supporting development projects abroad, the report noted the administration’s aim of furthering free-market ideals such as “citizen-responsive governance and light-touch regulation that fosters entrepreneurship and the efficient allocation of capital, and institutions that promote transparency, fairness, and the sanctity of contracts.”⁴⁸ It noted the progress made by the State Department and the US Agency for International Development (USAID) since 2017, to include a dedicated shift of resources to the Indo-Pacific compared to “the last three years” of the Obama administration. Between 2017-19, the Trump administration disbursed “more than \$4.5 billion in foreign

assistance to the region”, to represent an increase of 25 percent.⁴⁹ The third and fourth pillar documents—the US Department of Defense’s National Defense Strategy 2018⁵⁰ and the Indo-Pacific Strategy Report⁵¹—stressed on strengthening “alliances and partnerships in the Indo-Pacific to a networked security architecture capable of deterring aggression, maintaining stability, and ensuring free access to common domains.”⁵²

On this aspect, the Trump administration’s record has been more constructive than expected. For instance, the administration has built on the predecessor administration’s rapprochement with **Vietnam**. Trump has already visited the country twice, and Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc was the first Southeast Asian leader in the Trump era to be invited to the White House. Bilateral ties have been accorded with a strategic dimension, with the March 2018 visit of the USS Carl Vinson to Vietnam — the first such visit by a US aircraft carrier to the country since the end of the Vietnam War in 1975; and another US aircraft carrier (USS Theodore Roosevelt) visit in March 2020.⁵³ Furthermore, the Trump administration has transferred patrol boats worth US\$ 12 million to the Vietnamese coast guard,⁵⁴ and committed to provide them a total of 24 forty-five-foot Metal Shark patrol boats.⁵⁵ Lastly, over the course of the 18-month US-China trade war, gains for US-Vietnam trade have been evident with America’s imports from Vietnam surging by 36 percent, or \$17.5 billion⁵⁶ — which was instrumental in raising bilateral trade to US\$ 77 billion last year.⁵⁷

Meanwhile, America’s partnership with **Japan**, which constitutes the nodal security alliance in the region, has flourished under Trump owing largely to the remarkable personal dynamic between the US president and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. Between late 2016 and early 2020, the leaders “met 20 times, played 5 rounds of

golf, and had 32 phone calls, at times speaking twice a week.”⁵⁸ This fed into policy-level congruence, with the Trump administration agreeing to include in its negotiations with North Korea the issue of its alleged abductions of Japanese nationals in the late 1970s and early ‘80s.⁵⁹

Furthermore, in a move reflective of continuity with its predecessor, the Trump administration not only reaffirmed US commitment to defending Japan under the 1960 US-Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security, but also announced that the disputed Senkaku islands fall under the treaty’s purview.⁶⁰ On trade, the US contemplated a “sweeping move” to impose tariffs on imported Japanese cars on the basis of national security,⁶¹ as the Trump administration did on imported steel and aluminium by construing it as a national security threat under section 232 of the Trade Expansion Act of 1962. In late 2019 however, the two sides signed a limited trade deal on increased market access for US agricultural exports and commitments on US\$ 40 billion worth of digital trade.⁶² In this deal, Abe scored by holding the line against Trump’s demands for “better-than-TPP access to the Japanese agriculture market.”⁶³

Tensions over trade were also tempered by the Abe government’s decision to increase its purchase order of the US-made F-35 fifth-generation stealth fighter jets from 42 to 147⁶⁴ — making Japan the biggest international buyer of the jet.⁶⁵ The same deal gave an apt political cover to Abe’s conservative agenda of dampening Japan’s constitutional pacifism towards rebuilding its military, in the face of US pressure for Japan to increase imports of defense platforms to correct trade imbalances.⁶⁶ Most importantly, the Trump administration’s normative aim of “a Free and Open Indo-Pacific” had been inspired by Abe’s long-standing advocacy of a rules-based regional order,⁶⁷ and thus was indicative of the resilience of the US’ alliance with Japan.

US ties with **Australia** have similarly fared well under Trump. Trump hosted Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison to his second state dinner, marking the first time that such an event was hosted for Australia by the US since 2006.⁶⁸ In another incident of apparent continuity, the Trump administration fulfilled the Obama-era goal of overseeing a 2,500-size US Marines presence in Australia.⁶⁹ In 2019, the US and Australia also organised the biggest edition of the Talisman Saber, a biennial joint military exercise.⁷⁰ Furthermore, in joining Trump's policy aims abroad, Canberra followed Britain and Bahrain in the US' effort to protect transnational commerce in the Strait of Hormuz.⁷¹

On China, Canberra was an early proponent of the Trump administration's global campaign against Huawei. In setting the agenda, Australia banned Huawei from its 5G trials and announced "counterespionage safeguards... [and] blocked Huawei from building an undersea cable to the Solomon Islands."⁷² In joining the US, Canberra was the most vocal and early advocate for an independent investigation into the COVID-19 pandemic's origins. Joining hands with the European Union (EU), Australia pushed for a motion calling on World Health Organization (WHO) Director General to initiate such a probe.⁷³ Trump even called for expanding the G7 to add Australia.⁷⁴ Lastly, under the revived Quadrilateral Security Dialogue between Japan, India, Australia and the US, Australia is set to join the trilateral Malabar naval exercise (between the US, Japan and India) to lend greater operational heft to the Quad.⁷⁵

Meanwhile, the Trump administration renewed (until 2035) the 1990 Memorandum of Understanding Regarding United States Use of Facilities in **Singapore** — a landmark agreement that has "underpinned America's security presence in the region for almost 30 years."⁷⁶ Further, in approving the sale of the F-35 for Singapore, the Trump

administration has made it only the 12th country permitted to purchase the advanced-stealth fighter jet from the US.⁷⁷

With **the Philippines**—which in the final years of the Obama administration was seen increasingly tilting towards China—Trump seems to have salvaged the relationship, at least with respect to continued defence cooperation. For instance, Trump’s off-handed response to Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte’s decision to terminate the 1988 Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) with the US^{78,79} prevented Washington from being forced to bid against Beijing’s courtship of Manila. This followed Duterte’s decision to not adhere to an international court ruling in the Philippines’ favour on the South China Sea, and instead pursue a joint oil exploration project with China.⁸⁰ Subsequently, with China’s June 2020 announcement of administrative jurisdictions over contested islands in the South China Sea, it became apparent that a realpolitik bargain with China will not stop its intent to declare full control. Following which, Manila decided to revive the VFA “in light of political and other developments in the region.”⁸¹

Similarly, Trump’s ambivalent relationship with the **Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)**, has borne some gains on the policy level. Initially, questions over US dependability were raised when the 2019 annual East Asian Summit and the US-ASEAN Summit witnessed downgraded representation from the US.^{82,83} Many wondered if this signified a pattern of year-on-year downgrades: Trump himself attended the 2017 US-ASEAN summit, and then in 2018, Vice President Mike Pence represented the US. Moreover, the Trump administration has yet to fill the post of the US ambassador to ASEAN. However, on Trump’s push for more burden-sharing on the policy level, the US’ off-handed approach seems to have forced

ASEAN to shed its hedging impulses. In 2019, it released the ‘ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific’, in which it adopted the American nomenclature of the ‘Indo-Pacific’; declared its centrality to the strategic construct; and pressed for cooperation in the maritime domain, towards unhindered connectivity, UN SDGs, and economic development — all mostly in line with the Trump administration’s vision for a rules-based order.⁸⁴ Following which, the Trump administration seemed to pick up on the predecessor administration’s focus on institutionalising the US-ASEAN dynamic. In late 2019, for instance, the Trump administration oversaw the first ASEAN-US Maritime Exercise in the South China Sea.⁸⁵

Similarly, the Trump administration’s record on transnational trade has been mixed. In line with its declared abhorrence of multilateralism and Trump’s commitment to “never surrender America’s sovereignty to an unelected, unaccountable, global bureaucracy”,⁸⁶ the US withdrew from what was supposed to be a 12-nation Trans-Pacific Partnership.⁸⁷ In 2018, the remaining 11 participant nations finalised the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership.⁸⁸ Although the US’ withdrawal deprived it of an opportunity to anchor itself into the regional economy, the Trump administration has not shied from presenting the “economic pillar” of the Indo-Pacific strategy in order to also further American commercial interests. In formulating a vision, the Trump administration has encouraged the promotion of development finance and regional infrastructure projects with partner nations — once again in evident contrast to ‘America First’ impulses.⁸⁹

Moreover, with increasing stigma around Chinese ‘debt-trap’ investments,⁹⁰ the Trump administration in line with the normative aims of the Indo-Pacific strategy has deemed its initiatives to be focused

on anti-corruption measures, standards for fiscal transparency, offering assistance towards youth development, media freedom, and protecting fundamental freedoms and human rights.⁹¹ It has also not shied from openly trumpeting its own vision. At the 2018 APEC summit for instance, Vice President Pence said, “We don’t drown our partners in a sea of debt. We don’t coerce, corrupt or compromise your independence.”⁹²

A prominent action under the US’ economic vision for the region has been Trump signing the Better Utilization of Investments Leading to Development Act of 2018.⁹³ This law provides for the establishment of the International Development Finance Corporation (IDFC), by expanding functions of Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC) and other departments of the USAID.⁹⁴ With an enhanced budget of US\$ 60 billion (twice OPIC’s capacity), the IDFC will have the authority to offer limited equity investments with due technical assistance; operate with a longer authorisation period of up to seven years compared to OPIC’s year-to-year authorisation; and new oversight and risk management mechanisms like having its own Inspector General as opposed to falling under USAID jurisdiction.

Another such policy move came with prodding from Trump’s Director of the National Economic Council Larry Kudlow, who termed the Export-Import Bank of the United States (EXIM) as “a financial tool and a national security weapon” against China.⁹⁵ Awaiting action since July 2015, this led to the US Senate finally according EXIM the quorum required “to approve financing or loan guarantees larger than \$10 million.”⁹⁶ The action reportedly restored programmes worth US\$ 40 billion of potential US export deals that would support 230,000 jobs — thereby also bearing gains for Trump’s 2016

pledge on reviving US manufacturing jobs. The Trump administration subsequently reported that the US' exports to the Indo-Pacific have breached US\$ 720 billion in 2018, up by 4.5 percent over 2017.⁹⁷

In showcasing the high standards of US investments under the “economic pillar”,⁹⁸ with traditional partners like Japan and Australia, the US has announced the Blue Dot Network (BDN) to provide a “globally recognized seal of approval signifying adherence to high standards, the program will promote market-driven, transparent, and financially sustainable infrastructure projects.”⁹⁹ In what is evidently a push for multilateralism, the BDN encompasses cooperative agreement between IDFC and development finance institutions of Japan, Australia, Singapore, Canada, and the European Union.

Furthermore, with the Indo-Pacific Business Forum, the Trump administration has furthered American investment in the region. The US has committed US\$ 113 million to support projects in the region in the digital economy, energy, and infrastructure domains.¹⁰⁰ The US Commerce Department reports that it has “assisted more than 9,000 U.S. companies to do business in the Indo-Pacific region and facilitated more than \$7.65 billion in U.S. exports, of which, \$3.1 billion was for government tenders won by U.S. firms.”¹⁰¹ In parallel, it has “assisted over 2,500 Indo-Pacific companies seeking to invest in the United States facilitating \$18 billion of inward investment into the United States from the Indo-Pacific.”¹⁰²

Similarly, with his policy of “unleashing American energy dominance” via tapping into “new export opportunities” for US energy producers,¹⁰³ Trump has focused on the Indo-Pacific. With nearly a third of energy exports (worth US\$ 50 billion) already bound for the region,¹⁰⁴ the Asia Enhancing Development and Growth through Energy initiative

aims to “grow sustainable and secure energy markets throughout the Indo-Pacific.”¹⁰⁵ The development of energy infrastructure in the region includes: the US mobilising US\$ 806 million “in public and private investment across 11 renewable energy projects” in Indonesia alone;¹⁰⁶ US\$ 7 billion in investment to reform the region’s energy sector with the Asian Development Bank;¹⁰⁷ and regional LNG development with Japan, which has pledged US\$ 10 billion.¹⁰⁸

WHERE THE INDIAN AND PACIFIC OCEANS MEET

In formalising the scope of the Indo-Pacific’s purview, Trump has interlinked the destinies of the Indian and Pacific oceans. For one, his administration early on renamed the Hawaii-based US Pacific Command (USPACOM) to the US Indo-Pacific Command.¹⁰⁹ Notably, this accorded policy heft to US security policy’s long-standing conception of India being a prospective balancer to China.

Since the Second World War, US primacy has mostly been undergirded by its extensive military presence abroad. Organised into half-dozen combatant commands with specific geographic jurisdictions, the US security establishment seems to have had considerable foresight on the potential of US-India ties, long before an American political consensus was built on courting India as a “counterweight” to China. For instance, India — which is hardly a Pacific power, fell under the purview of USPACOM, while its South Asian neighbours such as Pakistan were slotted with the broader Middle East under the US Central Command (USCENTCOM).¹¹⁰ Therefore, the Trump administration’s decision to operationalise this security establishment view, also meant that the US recognises India’s maritime providence over the Indian Ocean region and the complementarities of its policy with India’s “Act East”.

To begin with, the Trump administration has shown considerable continuity on the predecessor administration's focus on institutionalising US-India bilateral ties. Throughout the post-Cold War era, US-India ties have been animated by their convergent interests, shared values, and the chemistry between the top political leadership — which over time fed bipartisan fervour on bilateral ties in both countries. Therefore, despite not having a formal defence pact nor a trading arrangement, India and the US managed to increase their trade to \$142.6 billion in 2018.¹¹¹ The US has also become India's second-largest source of arms, and Indian forces today conduct “more joint military drills, tabletop exercises, and defense dialogues with the US than with any other country.”¹¹² In possibly foreseeing the need for definite frameworks and standardised channels of communication to support the ever-expanding scope of US-India ties, the Obama administration stressed on regular consultative ministerial platforms. For example, the Homeland Security Dialogue between the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Department of Homeland Security was set up in 2010.¹¹³ The Obama administration also pursued linkages between Indian and American militaries. In its final year, the Obama administration finalised the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) to facilitate “basic terms, conditions, and procedures for reciprocal provision of logistic support, supplies, and services between the armed forces of India and the United States.”¹¹⁴

Similarly, under Trump, the US and India signed another interoperability pact, i.e. the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA), for “access to advanced defense systems and enable India to optimally utilize its existing US-origin platforms.”¹¹⁵ Reportedly, the final interoperability agreement i.e. the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) for mutual access of geospatial maps, is also in the works.¹¹⁶ Under Trump, the two sides

also instituted consultative platforms like the US-India 2+2 dialogue between foreign and defence cabinet chiefs, and the India-US Strategic Energy Partnership working group between India's Petroleum Minister and US Energy Secretary. Lastly, as a precursor to the realisation of the Obama-era US-India Defence Technology and Trade Initiative (DTTI), the Industrial Security Annex (ISA) was finalised to "facilitate the exchange of classified military information between Indian and the US defence industries."¹¹⁷ Apart from this continuity, the Trump administration has also ironed out policy-level divergences in the two nations' approach to the Indo-Pacific.

Eyes on CENTCOM

Under Trump, a significant development with respect to ensuring India's integration with the eastward security matrix of the Indo-Pacific has been the acknowledgment of India's westward concerns. Since 2002, New Delhi has repeatedly declined Washington's offers to have it post a liaison officer at PACOM, due to continued westward concerns such as state-sponsored terror emanating from Pakistan. Notably, the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government did not categorically reject the offer, but asked to post an officer at CENTCOM — which oversees Pakistan. At the time, possibly due to the US' operational dependence on Pakistan for its effort in Afghanistan, the US declined the counteroffer.¹¹⁸ However, with Trump's pressure on Pakistan for its inconsistencies on counterterrorism, India's question could have become more palatable. As a result, India's defence attache at its embassy in Bahrain now doubles up as a representative at NAVCENT¹¹⁹ — the CENTCOM's naval component and home of the US Fifth Fleet. India is now working towards US requests to post an officer at the Indo-Pacific Command in Hawaii.¹²⁰

Diversify energy sources

Another concern informing India's westward focus has been its energy security, for which it is heavily dependent on West Asia.^{121,122} The Trump administration initially exempted India's purchases from its "maximum pressure" policy against Iran, which was India's third largest source.¹²³ Subsequently, as the Trump administration raised the pressure to also target Iran's revenue from oil which made up "about 70 percent of the country's exports by value",¹²⁴ the exemptions for India and seven other countries were ended. This forced India to curb its imports from Iran despite favourable terms such as a 60-day credit period, free insurance, and cheaper freight.¹²⁵ Concurrently, the Trump administration accorded a push to US-India energy ties. In 2017, India started importing oil from the US as it sought to diversify its imports beyond the OPEC nations. It bought 1.9 million tonnes (38,000 bpd) of crude oil from the US in 2017-18 and another 6.2 million tonnes (1,24,000 bpd) in 2018-19.¹²⁶ Ahead of the end of the exemptions, in the first half of 2019-20 alone, the US "supplied 5.4 million tonnes of crude oil to India" to swiftly become India's sixth-largest oil supplier.¹²⁷

Cultivate a maritime focus

The Trump administration has pursued continuity on US-India defence trade. It oversaw the finalisation of deals for which negotiations started under the Obama administration (e.g., the 2015 sale of AH-64E Apaches), and even reciprocated to requests for particular platforms (like the MH-60 Romeo Seahawks).¹²⁸ Trump has also built on the Obama administration's Major Defense Partner status for India, with his administration according India with the Strategic Trade Authorisation-1 status.¹²⁹ The incumbent has also institutionalised a focus on India's capacity-building in the maritime

domain. The US' rationale is to support an advanced Indian maritime surveillance apparatus and enhanced maritime domain awareness in the Indian Ocean region — all for actualising the US' aim of having India emerge as a goods provider in the region.¹³⁰ The focus is evident with the administration's decision to often 'front-load' clearances even before Indian Request for Proposals are raised. For example, the US has cleared the sale of MK 45 5 inch/62 calibre anti-surface naval guns, MK 54 Torpedoes, and AGM-84L Harpoon missiles. The last two are particularly aimed at enhancing India's P-8 aircraft fleet (the world's largest, after only the US) to conduct "anti-surface warfare missions in defense of critical sea lanes while enhancing interoperability with the United States and other allied forces."¹³¹ Trump even overturned Obama's freeze on India's acquisition of unmanned systems, to make India "the first non-treaty partner to be offered" the Sea Guardian maritime drone.¹³²

CONCLUSION

Starting with the Indo-Pacific construct itself, Trump has formalised the purview of the US' role in the region — in apparent continuity with the predecessor administration's effort to assert the US as a Pacific power. Contrary to the 'America First' prescription of divorcing values from foreign policy, the Trump administration has accorded a normative dimension to its approach with the aim of cultivating a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific'. Moreover, in an effort to put an end to the incongruity in the US' post-Cold War policy on China, the Trump administration has sustained its confrontational posture against Beijing as the centrepiece of its approach to the region.

With partner nations in the region, the Trump administration has overseen the reaffirmation of its old commitments (in the cases, for example, of Japan, Singapore, and the Philippines), a continuation of

the predecessor administration's cultivation of nascent partners (like Vietnam), and the promotion of increased burden-sharing on the policy level (as with Australia and ASEAN). The Trump administration has complemented these decisions with the declaration of economic engagements being the other pillar of its approach to the Indo-Pacific region. It has identified complementarities between US businesses, on one hand, and the needs of the region, on the other. In what apparently contradicts the early 'America First' rhetoric of Trump, his administration has turned to development finance and multilateralism as avenues for the development of regional infrastructure.

Finally, in according policy heft to the US security establishment's long-standing position on the interlinked destinies of the Indian and Pacific oceans, the Trump administration has furthered the US-India bilateral dynamic by building on the Obama administration's focus on institutionalising bilateral ties, actively supporting India's capacity-building in the naval domain, and smoothening the policy divergences that have impeded New Delhi's integration into the eastward US security matrix. 

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