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# U.S. Strategy toward the Indo-Pacific Region: A Distracted Pacific Power?

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ANALYSIS

# Imprint

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# Table of contents

<b>1. The United States as a “Pacific Nation”</b>	<b>4</b>
1. Chart 1. The Importance of the Indo (Asia) – Pacific Region Articulated by the Post-Cold War U.S. Administrations	4
<b>2. Recognizing the Strategic Significance, yet Distracted by Other World Events</b>	<b>5</b>
1. Chart 2. “Distractions” from the Indo (Asia) – Pacific Region	5
<b>3. From Trump to Biden: More Continuity</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>4. Conclusion: Trump 2.0 – Now What?</b>	<b>11</b>

*"The United States is an Indo-Pacific power... In the years ahead, as the region drives as much as two-thirds of global economic growth, its influence will only grow—as will its importance to the United States."*

—The United States  
Indo-Pacific Strategy, February  
2022<sup>1</sup>

Since the end of the Cold War, the United States (U.S.) strategy toward Asia (Indo)-Pacific has faced a dilemma. While it clearly recognizes the long-term strategic importance of the region, Washington's attempts to maintain its strategic focus on the Indo-Pacific region have been repeatedly distracted by the more kinetic conflicts elsewhere. As the Second Trump administration's inauguration raises concerns about the dramatic change in U.S. foreign policy, now is a good opportunity to reflect on the evolution of U.S. strategy toward the Indo-Pacific in the last two decades.

## 1. The United States as a "Pacific Nation"

When the Biden administration issued the Indo-Pacific Strategy in February 2022, it argued that "The United

States has long recognized the Indo-Pacific vital to our security and prosperity."<sup>2</sup> Its National Security Strategy (NSS)—which followed eight months later—reiterated the critical importance of the Indo-Pacific region for U.S. national security interest, identifying the promotion of the free and open Indo-Pacific as the top priority among its regional strategy.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, the promotion of the Indo-Pacific strategy is one of the rare cases that the Biden administration sustained from the preceding Trump administration. In the 2017 NSS, the Trump administration identified the Indo-Pacific region as the most important battleground where the geopolitical competition between two visions of the world order—one represented by a free world and the other by repressive regimes—was manifesting itself, recognizing that the U.S. interest in a free and open Indo-Pacific is a long-standing geostrategic priority.<sup>4</sup>

In fact, one can make a case that the prioritization of the Indo (Asia)-Pacific region as a U.S. strategic priority, has been the enduring strategic objective that has been shared since the end of the Cold War by both Republican and Democratic administrations (Chart 1).

### 1.1. Chart 1. The Importance of the Indo (Asia) – Pacific Region Articulated by the Post-Cold War U.S. Administrations

Years	Administration	Republican/Democrat	Key concepts/initiatives
1993-2000	Clinton	Democratic	"The time has come for America to join Japan and the others in this region to create a new Pacific Community." <sup>5</sup> The Department of Defense also issued the East Asia Strategy Report in 1995 and 1998 in which the U.S. committed to maintain 100,000 U.S. troops in the region. <sup>6</sup>
2001-2008	Bush	Republican	"The war against terrorism has proven that

<sup>1</sup> The White House. *The Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*. February 2022.  
<https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> The White House. *The Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*. February 2022.  
<https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> The White House. *The National Security Strategy of the United States*. October 2022.  
<https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> The White House. *The National Security Strategy of the United States*. December 2017.  
<https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Clinton, Bill. "Building a New Pacific Community" *Address to the students and faculty at Waseda University*. July 7, 1993. U.S. Department of State Archives.  
<https://1997-2001.state.gov/regions/eap/930707.html>

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Department of Defense. *The United States Strategy for East Asia-Pacific Region*. 1995.  
<https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA298441.pdf>; U.S. Department of Defense. *The United States Strategy for East Asia-Pacific Region*. 1998.  
<https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA367522.pdf>

			American alliances in Asia not only underpin regional peace and stability but are flexible and ready to deal with new challenges.” <sup>7</sup> Many key U.S. foreign policy figures who were strong advocates for the U.S.-Japan Alliance joined the Administration in senior positions and their views were strongly reflected in its Asia-Pacific strategy. <sup>8</sup>
2009-2016	Obama	Democratic	“The United States is a Pacific Power and we are here to stay” in November 2011 <sup>9</sup> , which later was rephrased to a “rebalance”, built on two pillars—strengthening the alliances in the region and promoting Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). <sup>10</sup>
2017-2020	Trump	Republican	Promoting a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) as “the top priority” <sup>11</sup> despite withdrawing the U.S. from TPP; identifying China as the U.S. top strategic competitor. <sup>12</sup>
2021-2024	Biden	Democratic	“American interests can only be advanced if we firmly anchor the United States in the Indo-Pacific region” <sup>13</sup> ; modernized the bilateral alliances and enhanced trilateral as well as mini-lateral cooperation among allies and partners; promoted Indo-Pacific Economic Framework to promote a high-quality trade standard
2025-	Trump	Republican	?

## 2. Recognizing the Strategic Significance, yet Distracted by Other World Events

However, the past administrations have also found it difficult to sustain their strategic focus on this region. Simply put, despite the past U.S. administrations’ desire to

prioritize the Indo (Asia) – Pacific region, all of them have been “distracted” by the contingencies in the other parts of the world (Chart 2).

### 2.1. Chart 2. “Distractions” from the Indo (Asia) – Pacific Region

Years	Administration	Republican/Democrat	Key concepts/initiatives
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<sup>7</sup> The White House. *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*. September 2002. <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/63562.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> The INSS Special Report. “The U.S.-Japan Alliance: Advancing Toward a Mature Partnership.” The Institute of National Strategic Studies. October 11, 2020. <https://armitageinternational.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/ArmNye-Oct-2000-Report.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> The White House. “The Remarks by President Obama to the Australian Parliament.” November 17, 2011. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/17/remarks-president-obama-australian-parliament>

<sup>10</sup> The White House. “Fact Sheet: Advancing Rebalance to Asia and the Pacific” November 16, 2015. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/11/16/fact-sheet-advancing-rebalance-asia-and-pacific>

<sup>11</sup> U.S. Department of State. *Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision*. November 4, 2019. <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Free-and-Open-Indo-Pacific-4Nov2019.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, The White House. *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*. December 2017. <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> The White House. *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*. February 2022. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>

1993-2000	Clinton	Democratic	Somalia (1993-1995); Middle East (e.g., the 1998 Wye River Memorandum); Kosovo War (1998-1999)
2001-2008	Bush	Republican	9/11 terrorist attacks against the U.S. (2001), followed by the prolonged war in Afghanistan (through the Trump administration) and Iraq (through the Obama administration)
2009-2016	Obama	Democratic	Drawdown from Iraq while continued engagement in Afghanistan (2009-2016), Syrian civil war (2011 to present), and Russia's invasion of Crimea (2015)
2017-2020	Trump	Republican	Middle East (e.g., withdrawal from the Iran nuclear agreement, relocation of the U.S. Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, drawdown in Syria and Afghanistan, Solimani assassination, and the Abraham Accord)
2021-2024	Biden	Democratic	Withdrawal from Afghanistan (2021), Russian invasion of Ukraine (2022), and Hamas attack on Israel (2024)
2025-	Trump	Republican	Prolonged Russo-Ukrainian War? Destabilized Middle East?

The Bush (2001-2008) and Obama (2009-2016) administrations each offer particularly interesting examples of this trend of articulating the strategic importance of the Indo (Asia) – Pacific region in the early days of the administration—often criticizing the preceding administration's distraction of strategic focus away from the region—and yet continuing to address the need to respond to more immediate security threats elsewhere during their respective tenure.

As the 2000 presidential election campaign got underway in earnest, Condoleezza Rice, who would serve first as the National Security Advisor and then Secretary of State during the Bush administration, published an article titled “Promoting the National Interest” in *Foreign Affairs*. Intended to present a set of key principles for the would-be Bush administration's foreign policy, Rice criticized the Clinton administration's lack of “disciplined and principled foreign policy”, calling out that the Clinton administration's foreign policy, in the absence of clearly articulated principles and priorities, handled foreign policy challenges “crisis by crisis, day by day”.<sup>14</sup>

Rice argued that the Republican administration would replace the Clinton administration's reactive and haphazard approaches to foreign policy with an alternative approach that would reorganize U.S. foreign policy around the following key principles:

- ensuring U.S. military capabilities to “America's military can deter war, project

power, and fight and win in defense of its interests if deterrence fails”;<sup>15</sup>

- pursuing economic growth and political openness in the international community by promoting free trade and a stable international monetary system to those that would commit to these principles including in the areas;
- renewing relationships with allies who share American values and share the burden of promoting peace, prosperity, and freedom;
- focusing on establishing comprehensive relationships with the big powers that could potentially shape the future of the international system, particularly Russia and China; and
- decisively dealing with the threat of rogue regimes and hostile powers that could elevate the risks of terrorism and develop weapons of mass destruction.<sup>16</sup>

It is interesting to note that Rice, in this article she wrote over two decades ago, already argued that the U.S. pursuing its own national would “create conditions that promote freedom, markets and peace,” and that its actions benefiting the broader international community “is, in a sense, a second-order effect”—thus, working with international organizations and seeking multilateral

<sup>14</sup> Rice, Condoleezza. “Promoting the National Interest.” *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2000. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/campaign-2000-promoting-national-interest>

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

solutions “should not be the ends in themselves.”<sup>17</sup> In this context, it is particularly interesting that Rice’s argument against using the U.S. military as “the world’s ‘911’” would deplete its capabilities—an argument that President Barack Obama, a Democratic president, would make almost 15 years later.<sup>18</sup>

Asia was the first region in the world Rice identified in arguing the need for maintaining robust U.S. alliances. Citing the threats posed by North Korea and China, she proposed that the U.S. could not take its allies “for granted”, criticizing Clinton’s visit to China and proposing that a U.S. president should never “go to Beijing for nine days and refuse to stop in Tokyo or Seoul.”<sup>19</sup>

Rice’s focus on U.S. alliances in Asia was further augmented by a study group led by Richard L. Armitage who would serve as the Deputy Secretary of State during the Bush administration. The study had Joseph S. Nye, Jr.—a Harvard University professor who had served as the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asia-Pacific and the Chairman of National Intelligence Council—as the co-chair along with a few experts who were considered Democrats, and thus had the appearance of a bipartisan study group. Its final report—commonly called “Armitage-Nye Report”—criticized that the U.S.-Japan relationship went adrift after the bilateral alliance overcame the challenge of re-defining itself as “the cornerstone of peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific”, specifically pointing out that U.S. attention had gone more toward its bilateral relationship with China.<sup>20</sup> The report also suggested that the U.S. needs to refocus on shoring up its alliance with Japan by engaging Tokyo “with excellence without arrogance” and strive to elevate the U.S.-Japan alliance to a strategic partnership on a more equal footing, modeling after the “special relationship” between the U.S. and the United Kingdom.<sup>21</sup>

However, the terrorist attacks against the U.S. on September 11, 2001, completely shifted the strategic landscape. As then-President George W Bush talked about

the U.S. resolve to “shut down terrorist camps, disrupt terrorist plans, and bring terrorists to justice. And, second.....prevent the terrorists and regimes who seek chemical, biological or nuclear weapons from threatening the United States and the world”<sup>22</sup> and identified Iran, Iraq, and North Korea as “axis of evil”<sup>23</sup>, the U.S. security strategy, including regional ones, began to be predominantly driven from the prism of how to leverage U.S. alliances and partnerships to deter and defeat the terrorist attacks against the U.S. and its allies. By the time the Bush administration published its NSS in 2002, the U.S. unambiguously asserted that “the United States of America is fighting a war against terrorism with a global reach... the enemy is terrorism.”<sup>24</sup>

The 9/11 terrorist attacks against the U.S. greatly influenced the strategic outlook of not just the U.S. but other countries around the world. However, this near-singular strategic focus of the U.S. on their global war on terrorism (GWOT) came at the expense of (1) Washington’s diminished attention to parts of the world other than the Middle East, and (2) Washington’s regional strategies less nuanced, evaluating U.S. relationships with its allies and partners (both current and potential) almost entirely from the perspective of whether such a relationship benefited or harmed U.S. effort in GWOT. In the context of East Asia, some even argue that the lack of focus on the potential challenges presented by China during the Bush administration emboldened China and paved the way for China to demonstrate greater assertiveness which started in the 2010s and continues to intensify to this day.<sup>25</sup>

Similarly, the Obama administration signaled that it would shift its strategic focus back to the Asia-Pacific in its early days. A month after then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton revealed a vision for “a pivot” to Asia in October 2011<sup>26</sup>, then-President Barack Obama declared that the U.S. would turn its attention back to “the vast potential of the Asia

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> The White House. *Remarks by the President at United States Military Academy Commencement Ceremony*. May 28, 2014. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/05/28/remarks-president-united-states-military-academy-commencement-ceremony>

<sup>19</sup> Rice, Condoleezza, *op. cit.*

<sup>20</sup> The INSS Special Report. “The U.S.-Japan Alliance: Advancing Toward a Mature Partnership.” The Institute of National Strategic Studies. October 11, 2020. <https://armitageinternational.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/ArmNye-Oct-2000-Report.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> The White House. “President Delivers State of the Union Address” January 29, 2022. <https://georgewbush->

[whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html](https://whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html)

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> The White House. *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*. September 2002. <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/nsc/nss/2002/text/nss3.html>

<sup>25</sup> Lee, P.K. George W. Bush’s post-9/11 East Asia policy: enabling China’s contemporary assertiveness. *Int Politics* 61, 587–611 (2024). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-023-00486-0>

<sup>26</sup> Clinton, Hillary. “America’s Pacific Century”. *Foreign Policy*. October 11, 2011. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/>

Pacific region.”<sup>27</sup> Three years later, when he spoke again in Australia, Obama, citing his administration’s efforts to strengthen alliances and promote the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), reiterated that the U.S. rebalanced its foreign policy to play “a larger and lasting role” in Asia-Pacific under his watch. Acknowledging the criticism that the U.S. had often seemed to have prioritized a response to more urgent security threats, Obama remained firm in his argument that the Asia-Pacific region would “always be a fundamental focus” of his administration’s foreign policy.<sup>28</sup> While Obama emphasized that the U.S. would continue to urge China to “adhere to the same rule” as everyone else, his position remained that the U.S. would still seek a “constructive relationship” with China.<sup>29</sup>

And yet, it was during the Obama administration that China’s assertiveness grew. After Xi Jinping became China’s top leader in November 2012, China began to accelerate its assertive behavior. During his visit to the “Road to Rejuvenation” exhibit at the National Museum, shortly after becoming China’s new leader, Xi identified his goal of leading his country to become a “modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced and harmonious that can be achieved by 2049” and described it as the “dream of rejuvenation of Chinese nation.”<sup>30</sup> Since then, as he has steadily consolidated and centralized his power domestically, including eliminating the two-term limit in 2018, China has also accelerated its assertive behavior externally.

For instance, Xi discussed the importance of cybersecurity and the prevention of intellectual property theft when he

and Obama met in Sunnylands for a summit meeting in 2013.<sup>31</sup> When Obama hosted Xi at the White House for an official visit in September 2015, Xi openly confirmed that China did not intend to militarize the islands on which Beijing began construction,<sup>32</sup> despite the warning that the pace of China’s land reclamation in the South China Sea was far outpacing those by other countries that have overlapping territorial claims.<sup>33</sup> However, Xi did not respect these commitments he made to Obama. Even after Xi’s pledge that China would take steps to rein in intellectual property theft and other economically aggressive activities, the U.S. Justice Department indicted more Chinese nationals for their economic espionage in the U.S., causing some to question the effectiveness of the administration’s “deterrence by indictment” strategy.<sup>34</sup>

Similarly, despite Xi’s commitment not to militarize the South China Sea, China accelerated its land reclamation activities which led David Shear, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asia and Pacific Affairs, to testify before Congress in May 2015 that China’s land reclamation activities would elevate threats for the U.S. and its allies and partners in the vicinity of the South China Sea as the construction activities by Beijing would enable it to improve its offensive and defense military capabilities if Beijing so chooses.<sup>35</sup> When Obama left office, the hope to develop a constructive relationship with China mostly disappeared. Indeed, the Third Offset Strategy announced by the U.S. Department of Defense was an attempt by the U.S. to re-establish its deterrence capability with an acknowledgment that China had become a “pacing competitor” for the U.S.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>27</sup> The White House. “Remarks by President Obama to the Australian Parliament.” November 17, 2011. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/17/remarks-president-obama-australian-parliament>

<sup>28</sup> The White House. “The Remarks by President Obama at the University of Queensland.” November 15, 2014. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/11/15/remarks-president-obama-university-Queensland>

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> 国家民族事务委员会 (National Ethnic Affairs Committee). “Achieving Rejuvenation is the dream of Chinese People” November 29, 2012. <https://www.neac.gov.cn/seac/c103372/202201/1156514.shtml>

<sup>31</sup> The White House. “Remarks by President Obama and President Xi Jinping of the People’s Republic of China After the Bilateral Meeting.” June 8, 2013. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/06/08/remarks-president-obama-and-president-xi-jinping-peoples-republic-china->

<sup>32</sup> The White House. “Remarks by President Obama and President Xi Jinping of the People’s Republic of China in Joint Press Conference.” September 25, 2015.

<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/09/25/remarks-president-obama-and-president-xi-peoples-republic-china-joint> The Lawfare Institute, December 28, 2018. <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/failure-united-states-chinese-hacking-indictment-strategy>

<sup>33</sup> Southerland, Matthew. “China’s Island Building in the South China Sea: Damages to Marine Environment, Implications and International Law.” *U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission*. April 12, 2016. [https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/China%27s%20Island%20Building%20in%20the%20South%20China%20Sea\\_0.pdf](https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/China%27s%20Island%20Building%20in%20the%20South%20China%20Sea_0.pdf)

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, Goldsmith, Jack and Robert D Williams. “The Failure of the United States’ Chinese-Hacking Indictment Strategy”

<sup>35</sup> “Statement of David Shear, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asian & Pacific Security Affairs” Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, May 13, 2015. [https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/051315\\_Shear\\_Testimony.pdf](https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/051315_Shear_Testimony.pdf)

<sup>36</sup> See, for example, Eliason, William T. “Interview with Robert O. Work” *Joint Force Quarterly* 84. National Defense University Press. Published January 26, 2017.



While China stepped up its activities—both security and economic—in the Asia-Pacific region, the Obama administration grappled with a series of short-term foreign and security policy challenges outside of the region. Such challenges included the surge of U.S. troops in Afghanistan (2009), the killing of Osama bin Laden (2011), the joining of NATO efforts in the military intervention in Libya which was followed by the attacks against U.S. Embassy in Libya (2011), the emergence of the Islamic State (IS) (2014~), the restoration of a diplomatic relationship with Cuba (2014), the Iran nuclear deal (2015), and the Paris Climate Accord (2015).<sup>37</sup> While Obama managed to conclude and sign the TPP negotiation in October 2015,<sup>38</sup> the Trump administration withdrew the U.S. from it shortly after President Trump's inauguration.

### 3. From Trump to Biden: more continuity

There is a widespread perception that U.S. foreign policy went through a great deal of disruption during the first Trump presidency (2017-2021). In the area of foreign policy, the first Trump administration's transactional approach to U.S. alliances and partnerships unsettled Washington's relationship with its traditional allies and partners. In Europe, despite earlier efforts by Trump's first Secretary of Defense James Mattis to reassure the U.S. allies of the durability of the U.S. commitment to the transatlantic alliance, he also suggested the U.S. could not "continue to share of the defense of Western values."<sup>39</sup> In Asia, the Trump administration's demand that the Republic of Korea should share considerably more of the cost for U.S. troops stationed in Korea stalled negotiations over the bilateral Special Measures Agreement.<sup>40</sup>

Despite these headline-making news, U.S. policy toward the Indo-Pacific region enjoyed much greater continuity in

practice. After all, it was the first Trump administration that adopted the concept of "Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)" which anchored strong alliances and partnerships as the core principle of U.S. strategy toward the Indo-Pacific.<sup>41</sup>

Similar to his predecessor, Trump initially seemed to take a more measured approach toward China. Despite then-president-elect Trump's unusual decision to have a phone conversation with the then-Taiwanese president Tsai Ing-wen prior to his inauguration, he subsequently confirmed the U.S. One China Policy when he spoke to Chinese president Xi Jinping in early February 2017.<sup>42</sup> Trump and Xi exchanged presidential visits, with Trump hosting Xi in Mar-a-Lago in April 2017 and visiting Beijing in November 2017. However, when the Trump administration released its NSS in December 2017, it described China as a "revisionist power" that seeks to "displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region."<sup>43</sup> Similarly, the 2018 National Defense Strategy also identified China as U.S.'s top strategic competitor that would not hesitate to resort to "predatory economics to intimidate its neighbors while militarizing features in the South China Sea."<sup>44</sup>

The Trump administration's sharpened view toward China was articulated in detail when then-Vice President Mike Pence delivered his key China policy speech in October 2018. In his speech, Pence identified China as a country that, along with Russia, attempted to challenge and undermine the U.S., and harshly criticized China for its trade deficit to the U.S., human rights violation, Beijing's alleged attempt to gain U.S. intellectual property "at any means necessary"<sup>45</sup>, and militarily aggressive behavior.<sup>46</sup>

The Trump administration's hardened view on China was manifested in many policy decisions that the administration made, including tariffs (2018), placing Huawei on the "Entity List" to restrict the company's

<https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/Article/1038783/an-interview-with-robert-o-work/>

<sup>37</sup> Nelson, Michael. "Barack Obama: Foreign Affairs" University of Virginia, Miller Center. <https://millercenter.org/president/obama/foreign-affairs>

<sup>38</sup> U.S. Department of State. "Successful Conclusion of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) Negotiations." October 5, 2015. <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2015/10/247870.htm>

<sup>39</sup> Mattis argued in his first speech in front of NATO allies that Trump's "America First" talks to the reality that "we (the U.S.) cannot care more for your children than you do."

<sup>40</sup> Devan, Cole. "US and South Korea reach agreement to fund Korean working for US forces Korea" June 2, 2020. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/02/politics/us-south-korea-fund-forces-2020/index.html>

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> "Trump Agrees to honour 'One China' Policy Despite Threats" *BBC*, February 9, 2017. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-38927891>

<sup>43</sup> The White House. *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*. December 2017. <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> The White House. "Remarks by Vice President Pence on the Administration's Policy Toward China" October 4, 2018. <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-vice-president-pence-administrations-policy-toward-china/>

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

access to advanced technology in the U.S (2019) and cancelling Hong Kong's preferential trade status with the U.S (2020). In addition, the four years of the Trump administration are noteworthy for a strong support by the U.S. congress for the administration's policy decisions. For instance, when Trump cancelled Hong Kong's preferential trade status with the U.S. in July 2020 in protest of China's crackdown on democracy movements in Hong Kong, the Congress reinforced Trump's by passing the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act. This mandated the U.S. Department of State to annually report on whether Hong Kong's status justifies unique treatment. It also mandated the U.S. Department of Commerce to provide an annual report on China's attempt to evade tariffs by leveraging Hong Kong's preferred trade status with the U.S.<sup>47</sup> Additionally, as the suspicion in the U.S. grew that China might have contributed to the spread of COVID-19 worldwide by covering up its initial outbreak within China, members of the Congress, particularly the Republican members of the House of Representatives, mobilized their colleagues and launched the China Task Force in May 2020 to investigate a wide range of issues in China from national security to human rights violations. 15 members from 11 committees participated in the Task Force, reflecting the overall sentiments among House Republicans' hardening views toward China. Its final report, published in September 2020, declared that the "(L)eniency and accommodation of the CCP and its oppressive agenda is no longer an option", and offered numerous recommendations across six "pillars (policy areas)"—ideological competition, supply chain security, national security, technology, economics and energy, and competitiveness.<sup>48</sup>

The overall shift in the U.S. view toward China as a U.S. strategic competitor continued throughout the Biden administration. If anything, the Biden administration doubled down on the direction set by the Trump administration and took it a step further by actively exploring ways to create frameworks with U.S. allies and partners to counter China in both security and economics. For instance, the Biden administration intensified its engagement with its Quad partners—Australia, India, and Japan—in areas such as COVID-19 vaccine production and distribution, climate change, science and technology cooperation and, critical and emerging technologies.<sup>49</sup> Biden hosting the in-person Quad Summit—one of the first summit meetings his administration hosted at the White House in-person following the easing on COVID-19

restriction on international travels and in-person meetings—signified Biden's intention to prioritize the cooperative framework with major U.S. allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific region. In addition to Quad, the Biden administration not only attempted to revitalize the existing U.S. alliance-based trilateral cooperative frameworks among its allies and partners such as U.S.-Japan-Australia, U.S.-Japan-India, and U.S.-Japan-ROK but also sought greater linkage between its Indo-Pacific and transatlantic allies. For instance, NATO's cooperation with the so-called "IP4" (Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and the Republic of Korea) was significantly strengthened during the Biden administration, with all four leaders of the IP4 countries attending the NATO Summit in Washington in 2024 for NATO's 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Even though IP4 countries have had a history of cooperation with NATO in the past, including counter-piracy operations in the Indo-Pacific and stabilization and reconstruction operations in Afghanistan, the strengthening of the U.S. transatlantic and Indo-Pacific alliance really began to take shape as Europe increasingly came to appreciate the security challenges posed by China and its impact on Europe. The Russo-Ukrainian War also accelerated deeper cooperation between NATO and its IP4 partners, with these U.S. allies taking a more serious look at the inter-regional impacts of growing security challenges posed by China and the Russo-Ukrainian war.<sup>50</sup>

In the area of economy and trade, the Biden administration launched the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) in May 2022. With the negotiations for all the four pillars—trade, supply chains, clean economy and fair economy—concluded in November 2023, the IPEF is intended to serve as a U.S.-led high-standard multilateral trade agreement among the U.S., its allies and partners seeking to promote "resilience, sustainability, inclusiveness, economic growth, fairness, and competitiveness" among the 14 member countries.<sup>51</sup> The IPEF has also partnered with private foundations and the corporate sector to launch two IPEF-led initiatives—Upskilling Initiatives and the IPEF Public-Private Partnership for Prosperity.

As the Biden administration worked to create an alternative multilateral fora to facilitate trade and commerce among the countries in the Indo-Pacific region, it also tightened its restrictions against China in emerging and critical technologies, restricting U.S. investments in Chinese firms in these industries. Such measures included blacklisting Chinese telecom, quantum computing, and AI

<sup>47</sup> U.S. Congress. "Hong Kong Democracy and Human Rights Act of 2019".

<https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/1838/text>

<sup>48</sup> U.S. House of Representatives, *China Task Force Report*. September, 2020. <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/CHINA-TASK-FORCE-REPORT-FINAL-9.30.20.pdf>

<sup>49</sup> The White House. "Joint Statement of Quad Leaders." September 24, 2021. [https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-](https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/09/24/joint-statement-from-quad-leaders/)

<room/statements-releases/2021/09/24/joint-statement-from-quad-leaders/>

<sup>50</sup> U.S. Institute of Peace. *Reports on Expert Study Group on NATO and Indo-Pacific Partners*. February 19, 2024. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/02/report-expert-study-group-nato-and-indo-pacific-partners>

<sup>51</sup> U.S. Department of Commerce. "Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity." <https://www.commerce.gov/ipef>

companies to restrict their access to U.S. investment in these firms, placing sanctions against Chinese and Hong Kong entities including government officials, and adding more Chinese companies to the Commerce Department's "Entity List".<sup>52</sup> These measures affected Chinese companies including Huawei, ZTE and Weibo. The Biden administration also announced a "diplomatic boycott" of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics citing China's treatment of the ethnic minority in Xinjiang and did not send a high-level delegation to the Winter Olympics.<sup>53</sup>

Many of the Biden administration's moves were based on legislations passed by the U.S. Congress. From 2021 through 2024, both chambers of the Congress introduced a number of legislations to restrict Chinese access to U.S. markets in critical and emerging technologies, including the Innovation and Competitiveness Act of 2021, the Uighur Forced Labor Prevention Act of 2021, and the

America Competes Act of 2022. Furthermore, the U.S. House of Representatives established the House Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), commonly referred to as "House Select Committee on China", in January 2023 with the mission "to build consensus on the threat posed by the Chinese Communist Party and develop a plan of action to defend the American people, our economy, and our values".<sup>54</sup> Its first (and so far the only) public hearing by the Committee attracted great media attention, as former U.S. government officials including Matt Pottinger, who formerly served as Senior Director for Asia in the National Security Council during the Trump administration, testified on the Chinese government's human rights violations, lack of transparency, and the growing national security concerns that its military as well as economic activities have been causing.<sup>55</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion: Trump 2.0—Now What?

The inauguration of the second Trump administration in January 2025 has already raised many questions about the future of its U.S. foreign policy trajectory. In particular, because of the memories of Trump's transactional approaches to foreign policy and lack of appreciation of the values in alliances and partnerships during his first term, U.S. allies and partners worldwide have been closely observing as his foreign policy approaches take shape in the first months of his second term.

Donald Trump's discussion of his foreign policy vision during the 2024 presidential campaign stirred concerns among U.S. allies and partners around the world. More importantly, they caused concerns among foreign policy experts in the U.S., including some Republicans. To be sure, Trump and those who worked for him during his first administration continue to advocate for Trump's "peace through strength" approach in the context of his "America First" foreign policy vision. For example, Robert O'Brien, Trump's National Security Advisor from 2019 to 2021, advocated for Trump's foreign policy approach by refuting

that "America First" did not mean "America Alone" during the first Trump administration, and insisting that "(t)he fact that Trump took a new look at which countries and groups were most pertinent does not make him purely transactional or an isolationist hostile to alliance".<sup>56</sup> On the other hand, other seasoned Republican foreign policy hands sounded the alarm at Trump's foreign policy outlook. Rice, who first served as the National Security Advisor and then as Secretary of State during the eight years of the George H. Bush administration, argued that the future of our world order will be shaped either by the countries that support democracy and free-market or by the revisionist powers which try to go back to a day of territorial conquest abroad and authoritarian practices at home.<sup>57</sup> While acknowledging that the U.S. is "exhausted" from decades of bearing the burden of being a leader and a guarantor of post-World War II international order, she warned that the U.S. strategic competitors "don't mind their own business" and rather "seek to shape the global order" and that the U.S. will not succeed without sustained engagement with the world.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>52</sup> For a detailed timelines for these measures, please see China Briefing, "U.S.-China Relations in the Biden Era: A Timeline" <https://www.china-briefing.com/news/us-china-relations-in-the-biden-era-a-timeline/>

<sup>53</sup> Cha, Victor. "The Biden Boycott of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics" January 18, 2022. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/biden-boycott-2022-beijing-winter-olympics>

<sup>54</sup> U.S. House Select Committee on CCP. "About the Committee" <https://selectcommitteeontheccp.house.gov/about-committee>

<sup>55</sup> U.S. House Select Committee on CCP. "The Chinese Communist Party's Threat to America." February 28, 2023. <https://selectcommitteeontheccp.house.gov/sites/evo>

[subsites/selectcommitteeontheccp.house.gov/files/evo-media-document/2.28.2023-hearing-transcript.pdf](https://selectcommitteeontheccp.house.gov/files/evo-media-document/2.28.2023-hearing-transcript.pdf)

<sup>56</sup> O'Brien, Robert. "The Return of Peace Through Strength: Making the Case for Trump's Foreign Policy." *Foreign Affairs*, Volume 103, Number 4 (July/August 2024.) pp. 24-38.

<sup>57</sup> Rice, Condoleezza. "The Perils of Isolationism: The World Still Needs America—and America Still Needs the World." *Foreign Affairs*, Volume 103, Number 5 (September/October 2024) pp. 8-25.

<sup>58</sup> Rice, Condoleezza. "The Perils of Isolationism: The World Still Needs America—and America Still Needs the World." *Foreign Affairs*, Volume 103, Number 5 (September/October 2024) pp. 8-25.

Trump's key foreign policy and defense nominations confirm concerns held by U.S. allies and partners worldwide. For instance, in his confirmation hearing on January 15, Secretary of State Marco Rubio declared that the postwar global order is "not just obsolete; it is now a weapon being used against us." Rubio further identified three benchmarks against which the second Trump administration measures any foreign policy decision at hand: "Does it make America safer?" "Does it make America stronger?" and "Does it make America more prosperous?"<sup>59</sup> He further argued that focusing on America's national interest first and foremost is neither "isolationism" nor "abandonment of our (U.S.) values," but rather a "commonsense realization" that "countries acting based on what they perceive as their core national interest has been the norm not the exception."<sup>60</sup> Similarly, Elbridge Colby, the nominee for Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, stated during his confirmation hearing that while he values alliances, U.S. alliances must be "adapted" and put on "more sustainable footing" and that U.S. interests must be put "first and foremost."<sup>61</sup>

However, as far as the Indo-Pacific strategy is concerned, the second Trump administration so far has demonstrated more continuity with the policies of the Biden administration. The fact that Rubio held his first meeting with his counterparts from the Quad partners only a few hours after taking office was a clear signal that the Trump administration will continue to prioritize the Free and Open Indo-Pacific as well as the region's rule-based architecture in which "rule of law, democratic values, sovereignty, and territorial integrity are upheld and defended."<sup>62</sup> In addition, two out of the three Quad countries' leaders—Japan's Shigeru Ishiba on February 7 and India's Narendra Modi on February 13—were already been invited to the White House for a summit meeting with President Trump. Both meetings were largely regarded as successful with a set of new forward-looking initiatives announced at both summits.<sup>63</sup>

The Trump administration's emphasis on the Indo-Pacific region has been underpinned by its hardline view toward

China. For instance, Rubio, who has been known for his hardline view against China from his days in the Senate, made a harsh reference to China (particularly targeting the Chinese Communist Party) in his confirmation hearing saying that: "they have lied, cheated, hacked, and stolen their way to global superpower status, at our expense."<sup>64</sup> In the aforementioned article in *Foreign Affairs*, Trump's former national security advisor Robert O'Brien called for "Clarity on China", arguing that, as "China seeks to undermine American economic and military strength, Washington should return the favor—just as it did during the Cold War, when it worked to weaken the Soviet economy."<sup>65</sup> The administration's hardened stance vis-à-vis China will likely continue to garner bipartisan support in the Congress as well. The House of Representatives reauthorized the House Select Committee on CCP on January 3, 2025, for the 119<sup>th</sup> Congress to continue its activities.

While the Trump administration's continuous prioritization of the Indo-Pacific region that leverages the existing alliance and partnership is encouraging, a few concerns remain. First is the growing fragility of the U.S. transatlantic alliance, particularly following the unexpected end to the Trump-Zelenskyy meeting in the White House on February 28, 2025. Even though the peace negotiations seem to have been resuscitated among the U.S., Russia and Ukraine, the impact of not only the outcome but the process of peace negotiation and Europe's responses are being closely observed by U.S. allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific region. At a time where there is a growing recognition among U.S. allies in Europe, as well as those in the Indo-Pacific that a crisis in one theater would have a deep impact on the security in the other, especially given the growing relationship among Russia, China, North Korea and Iran, Washington's handling of its transatlantic alliance, can impact the credibility of U.S. commitment in Indo-Pacific alliances and partnerships.

Second and more importantly, while Trump's advisors are largely unified in their view of China as the top U.S. strategic competitor and the need for it to be deterred, Trump's own views remain unpredictable. So far since

<sup>59</sup> Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. "Secretary-designate Marco Rubio SFRC Confirmation Hearings Opening Remarks." January 15, 2025. [https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/6df93f4b-a83c-89ac-0fac-9b586715afd8/011525\\_Rubio\\_Testimony.pdf](https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/6df93f4b-a83c-89ac-0fac-9b586715afd8/011525_Rubio_Testimony.pdf)

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> Senate Committee on Armed Services. "United States Senate to Consider the Nomination of Mr. Elbridge A. Colby to be Considered for Undersecretary of Defense for Policy." March 4, 2025. <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/30425fulltranscript.pdf>

<sup>62</sup> U.S. Department of State. "Joint Statement by the Quad Foreign Ministers." January 21, 2025.

<https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-by-the-quad-foreign-ministers/>

<sup>63</sup> For U.S.-Japan summit, see The White House. "United States-Japan Joint Leaders' Statement" February 7, 2025. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/2025/02/united-states-japan-joint-leaders-statement/>; for U.S.-India summit, see The White House. "United States-India Joint Leaders' Statement" February 13, 2025. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/2025/02/united-states-india-joint-leaders-statement/>

<sup>64</sup> Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. *Op. cit.*

<sup>65</sup> O'Brien, *op. cit.*

taking office, Trump has sent mixed signals when it comes to his China policy. On one hand, he remains steadfast in expanding restrictions on U.S. firms' investment in China in the sectors that are considered important for China's military-civil fusion industrial strategy, mostly focusing on critical emerging technologies. The administration also seems determined to deny China's access to U.S. advanced technology and Chinese investments in U.S. critical infrastructure. Furthermore, Trump's statements expressing a desire to regain control of the Panama Canal and encourage Greenland to seek independence to be integrated into the U.S. also seem to be driven by his desire to keep China's growing ambition and influence in these areas in check.<sup>66</sup> And as recently announced, he is moving ahead with imposing additional tariffs on Chinese imports into the U.S.<sup>67</sup> At the same time, Trump is known for wanting to be a dealmaker, which raises questions on whether he would be open to making a "deal" with Beijing and at what cost. The issue came into focus during the confirmation hearing of Elbridge Colby where several Senators pushed Colby to clarify his position on the U.S. commitment to the defense of Taiwan and its durability. Colby's response—in which he essentially emphasized that, while the loss of Taiwan will be "disastrous to American interest", not only Taiwan but also Japan would need to step up and do more—hardly quelled the concerns among officials in Tokyo and Taipei.

Finally, there is also the undeniable political reality in the U.S. that, despite his unconventional approaches to both domestic and foreign policies, the American public seems to support Trump, although the most recent imposition of reciprocal tariffs on U.S. trading partners might have a negative impact on his approval rating.<sup>68</sup> Even Rice, who made a strong case that the U.S. must choose to stay engaged with the world, acknowledges that the U.S., even if it chooses to stay engaged, would engage in a different way than it has for the last eight decades, with more reliance on deterrence, greater expectation of its allies to do more both in terms of cost and responsibilities, and with less ambitious trade agreements that are likely to be more regional and selective.<sup>69</sup> Although the second Trump administration's Indo-Pacific policy demonstrates considerable continuity with the previous Biden administration—more so than in any other policy areas—U.S. allies and partners in the region will likely need to seek ways to cooperate among themselves without relying on the U.S. This continuity, after all, cannot be assumed.

<sup>66</sup> For the evolution of China's Arctic Policy, see Sun, Yun. "The Intricacy of China's Arctic Policy" Stimson Center. August 27, 2018. <https://www.stimson.org/wp-content/files/file-attachments/Stimson%20-%20The%20Intricacy%20of%20China's%20Arctic%20Policy%20-%20Yun%20Sun.pdf>

<sup>67</sup> The White House. "Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Imposes Tariffs on Imports from Canada, Mexico and China." February 1, 2025. [https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-](https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/02/fact-sheet-president-donald-j-trump-imposes-tariffs-on-imports-from-canada-mexico-and-china/)

[sheets/2025/02/fact-sheet-president-donald-j-trump-imposes-tariffs-on-imports-from-canada-mexico-and-china/](https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/02/fact-sheet-president-donald-j-trump-imposes-tariffs-on-imports-from-canada-mexico-and-china/)

<sup>68</sup> Lotz, Avery. "Trump 2.0 initial approval rating higher than in First Term." February 9, 2025. <https://www.axios.com/2025/02/09/trump-approval-ratings-poll>

<sup>69</sup> Rice, *op.cit.*

