

Possible Scenarios in the Post-Donald Trump Period of the USA's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy

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Abstract

In 2017 US President Donald Trump announced the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy to replace the “rebalance” strategy of the predecessor Obama administration. After nearly four years in implementation, the question is, can strategy be continued under the incumbent President Joe Biden? The article carries out an analysis of a number of influencing factors and gives three distinct possible scenarios for US Strategy in the coming times which range from cooperation, ambivalence, and competition. The authors argue that this strategy will be maintained despite some changes in accordance with the domestic and foreign direction of the new Administration.

Introduction

In 2017, when he was in power for a year, Donald Trump announced the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy to replace the “rebalance” strategy of the predecessor Obama administration. After nearly four years in implementation, the question is, can this strategy be continued under the incumbent President Joe Biden? The article will analyze a number of influencing factors, thereby giving possible scenarios for this strategy in the coming time and argue that this strategy will be maintained despite some changes in accordance with the domestic and foreign direction of the new Administration.

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Factors Affecting the Implementation of the Strategy

Predicting the future of a strategy is relatively difficult and depends on many factors: external opportunities, challenges and internal advantages and difficulties.

External Opportunities and Challenges. The biggest external advantage to implementing the strategy is that the US is still needed by its allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific region. Although China is gradually establishing its position in Indo-Pacific, the US is still a difficult alternative to the role of regional leadership in particular and the world in general. On the other hand, the continuous increase in military power coupled with China's hegemonic policy and territorial claims in many regions of China have touched the security and interests of many countries in the region like Japan, India etc. In other words, the US involvement and commitment is still expected by many countries to create a peaceful counterbalance to curb China's rise.

However, the need of the countries in the region to need the US does not mean putting full faith in the US leadership role in the regional security architecture. To some extent, the United States is moving further and further away from its Asian counterparts. "It's a new day for America. It's a new day for the world"¹, declared Antony Blinken on his confirmation as the 71st US secretary of state. Just hours into his tenure, the American diplomatic chief held phone conversations with his counterparts from Mexico and Canada, as well as key Asian allies such as South Korea and Japan. But it was Blinken's conversations with Southeast Asian nations that were particularly telling, signalling the overall tenor of the Biden administration's strategy in Asia. And it's in Southeast Asia, the new theatre of superpower rivalry, where the Biden administration's foreign policy mettle will be tested like nowhere else. Blinken will face major hurdles, namely prickly allies, wavering strategic partners, and an increasingly dominant China, which has brought tangible economic benefits to its Southeast Asian neighbours.² Washington's credibility in the Indo-Pacific region is an open question where US allies and partners can find ways to hedging strategy. The fact is that many countries in the region have both fostered relations with the United States and sought other links to reduce dependence on uncertainty in the Trump administration's policy.

Another challenge to the strategy is China's regional response and influence. China's position in the region is one of the Strategy's biggest obstacles. Especially in the situation that China is increasingly using economic sanctions to achieve its policy goals and relying on its great influence to intervene in the politics and society of the related countries. China's negative response to the Strategy is also a major obstacle. In addition, India, a regional power which the US hopes to anchor the 'QUAD' to contain China, will be difficult to accept as the US chess piece. Conversely, if there is a well-balanced policy, India can benefit directly from both the US and China, instead of just the US. Prime Minister Modi said that he would not see Indo-Pacific as a strategy against any country.³ Without India's support, the US Indo-Pacific Strategy would be seriously paralysed.

Advantages and Disadvantages Inside. Besides the impact of external factors, the future of the Strategy also depends on some internal conditions. There are several advantages to implementing external strategy in general and Indo-Pacific strategy in particular.

Internally, the goal of restraining China and maintaining American leadership is a common goal of the United States regardless of which party comes to power. In a commentary published in Foreign Policy magazine in 2020, Joe Biden once wrote: "China represents a special challenge. I understand what we are dealing with". Therefore, under Joe Biden, the policy target for the region will not have a complete reversal from its predecessor D Trump. This strategy is likely to remain a core point in US regional security policy in the coming years due to the tendency to continue to intensify strategic competition between the US and China.

Despite a relative decline in power and power, the US continues to be the world's only comprehensive superpower in terms of strength and influence. The US is still the world's largest economy (forecast at least until 2035)⁴ and is recovering well; the US has the largest and most modern military equipment in the world, especially in terms of air force and navy. US defense spending is the largest in the world, accounting for nearly 50% of global military costs. The United States is the only country with a global military alliance system with nearly 800 military bases in 38 countries and territories with about 200,000 troops (accounting for more than 15% of the total US military), therefore the US is the

only country capable of deploying troops to different regions of the world through a system of allies/partners and military bases overseas. America still leads the world in science - technology, especially in the science - technology fields of the future, such as artificial intelligence, internet of things, biotechnology.

Besides, however, there are still challenges with the Strategy. The first is that American society is deeply divided as a result of a presidential election with many unprecedented events (such as Trump supporters storming Capitol Hill to protest the outcome of the election in favour of Joe Biden or D Trump becoming the only President twice impeached). In addition, due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, the new administration in the US will have to put efforts to solve domestic problems, recover the economy and prevent pandemics, thus supporting the goals of the Indo-Pacific strategy will become more difficult.

Forecasting the Strategy Scenarios

Based on the results of analysis and synthesis, the difficulties and challenges for the strategy, there will be some possible scenarios which are as follows:

Scenario 1: The US Abandons the Strategy, Cooperates with China. The assumption of this scenario is that the United States fails to curb China's growth and power across all sectors. Not only that, the domestic problems (post-electoral social divisions, the negative impact from the Covid-19 pandemic and so on) forced the US to concentrate resources and priorities to resolve it. Abandoning the intervention strategy and leaving the region means a reduction in the US's level of commitment to allies and partners in general. At that time, allies and partners will have to choose between two options: strengthening relations with China, accepting its leadership position in the region, or continuing to challenge China's leadership in the context of the absence of support from American power. The declining US presence and influence in the region, especially in the military sector, also means that military-political tensions in the region are likely to decline, both in volume as well as in degree. Therefore, the regional situation is more likely to become stable, with less risk of conflict.

However, based on the actual situation, this is the least likely scenario because Indo-Pacific is an important region for the US.

Although the conflict between Joe Biden and Donald Trump was profound, America's close interests lie in the Indo-Pacific region and China's growth and assertiveness are encroaching on these interests. Therefore, deploying strategies to contain China will be one of America's priority goals.

Scenario 2: The US Continues to Implement the Strategy, Demonstrates its Antagonistic Attitude towards China and Maintains its Presence and Commitment to Allies and Partners at the Present Level. This scenario assumes that the Joe Biden administration maintains the status quo of the region but at the same time has to deal with domestic problems. The balance of power is not tilted in favor of the US or China but will be in balance. China continues to grow, but it is not enough to overtake America. The US is forced to both cooperate and compete with China in all fields, seeking compromises on a number of strategic issues to resolve the consequences of Covid-19 in the country. The strategy continues to be deployed in moderation, enough to maintain the US presence and position in the region, but not to overwhelm Chinese power. The US will still maintain its commitments to its former allies and partners; at the same time, expanding the search for military cooperation with new partners. Before the moves to deploy the US Strategy, China will also constantly strive to build influence over the countries in the region, even with America's allies and partners. Meanwhile, most countries will have difficulty in balancing relations with the two great powers. In this scenario, although there may be small changes, but basically, the relationship between the countries in the region remains the same.

In fact, in the early days of Biden's new administration, this is the most likely scenario. During his confirmation hearing on 19 January 2021, the new US Secretary of State Blinken said he believed that "president Trump was right in taking a tougher approach to China" and that "the basic principle was the right one, and I think that's actually helpful to our foreign policy" and confirmed that Beijing is posing the "biggest challenge" for Washington's interests.⁵ He also agreed with the previous administration's stance on the Xinjiang issue, and warned that any move to use force against Taiwan would become "a serious mistake". National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan, meanwhile, has said the US should reinforce freedom of navigation operations in the South China

Sea.⁶ As for Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin, he has described China as, “the most significant threat going forward because China is ascending”⁷ as opposed to other strategic adversaries such as Russia.

Scenario 3: The US strengthens its Regional Presence and Pushes the Strategy to a New Level. This scenario is based on the assumptions against scenario 1. In this scenario, China is in crisis and cannot maintain its level of development. Meanwhile, the United States has solved internal difficulties, escaped the socio-economic crisis caused by Covid-19 and the rifts and divisions of the post-Trump period, able to maintain its economic, military, technological advantages and continue to hold its position of superpower. On the other hand, the US policies aimed at restraining China brought about positive results and forced China to make concessions to the US on many issues. Meanwhile, the US continued to increase its influence in the region and the Indo-Pacific remained a free navigation and over-flight zone, guaranteed by the US and its allies and partners. Indo-Pacific allies and partners show a stronger bond in relations with the US because this superpower plays a dominant role and sets the rules of the game for the region.

This scenario demonstrates a relatively stable nature because of the emergence of a single leadership factor that governs regional security because other actors cannot afford to be a counterbalance to the US. However, the crucial point of this scenario is that the US must play a balancing and flexible role in leading regional mechanisms. The stability of this scenario is also highly dependent on US attitudes toward China. Despite China's declining position, facing a strategy of containment and seeking to exclude itself from the process of regional integration and development can all provoke a strong resistance from China. This may be the most optimistic scenario, considering the fact that the Joe Biden administration can quickly finish solving domestic problems.

Conclusion

Predicting the future of the Strategy is not only based on those results and limitations, but also must consider internal and external influencing factors. From there, the possible scenarios for the Strategy in the near future and its impacts on the general security environment of the Indo-Pacific area are presented. Time is still

ahead with the four-year term of the Joe Biden administration. In a context with many uncertainties both internally and externally, the US strategy towards the Indo-Pacific Region will contain many unexpected factors that need to be further monitored and analysed.

Endnotes

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