



By Prashanth Parameswaran

INTRODUCTION

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SOUTHEAST ASIA'S SIGNIFICANCE IN THE U.S. INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY

Southeast Asia's centrality to U.S. Asia policy has often not been matched by the level of attention given to it, particularly during the first few decades that followed the end of the Vietnam War. Nonetheless, under the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations, U.S. policymakers displayed a growing recognition of importance of the region on its own merits as well as to the wider region, be it in terms of its brisk economic growth rates or its role in addressing challenges ranging from terrorism to climate change to China's rise.³

A major driver of the Trump administration's emphasis on Southeast Asia is the subregion's importance within the broader Indo-Pacific, a region of great importance to U.S. interests and that of its allies and its partners as recognized by officials and elites over the years.⁴ That is no surprise: within that broader story, Southeast Asia is clearly a significant actor when viewed from these different lenses.

Materially, if the starting premise of the FOIP strategy is that the Indo-Pacific region is significant economically and strategically for the United States to invest in—representing more than half of the global population and more than half of the global economy—then Southeast Asia accounts for a major part of that importance. Globally, the countries of Southeast Asia today represent the world's third largest population and the fifth largest economy, a testament to decades of prosperity in spite of the challenges that remain.⁵ Within the Indo-Pacific, Southeast Asia is also home to two of the United States' five treaty allies—Thailand and the Philippines—as well as several other key strategic partners such as Indonesia, Singapore, and Vietnam, which have also been strengthening their ties with other U.S. allies and partners in the region as well such as Japan and Australia.

Geographically, Southeast Asia sits right at the center of the Indian Ocean to the west and the Pacific Ocean to the east, which are the two ends of the Indo-Pacific vision which seeks to emphasize its significance as a single strategic environment. And to the extent that FOIP places an emphasis on the maritime domain, Southeast Asia's importance is critical since it is home to the vital sea lanes of communication that link both the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean, including not only the South China Sea, where one third of global shipping passes, but other strategic waterways as well, such as the Malacca Straits, which is one of the world's busiest waterways, and the Sulu Sea, which is both a place of rampant transnational crimes and emerging intraregional cooperation, as evidenced by trilateral patrols between Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines.⁶

Geopolitically, Southeast Asia is arguably a key battleground in the Indo-Pacific where the "freeness" and "openness" of the FOIP strategy will be tested. Southeast Asia is a collection of relatively newer, very diverse states, several of which are rather underdeveloped economically and politically and maintain fluid and diverse alignments. This accounts for the spectrum of views on issues critical to the advancement of a FOIP strategy, be it China's role in the region or the advancement of democracy and human rights.⁷ Southeast Asia is also home to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), a regional grouping which, for all its flaws, is a fulcrum of the Asia's multilateral architecture, with its stream of annual meetings representing a critical front in the battle for ideas.⁸

To their credit, U.S. officials have recognized Southeast Asia's general significance to the advancement of a FOIP strategy early on, and have been prudent in beginning to articulate this over the past few months. As U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo put it succinctly in his remarks in July at the Indo-Pacific Business

about the focus and intent of the strategy. While U.S. officials have repeatedly defined the FOIP strategy as being a comprehensive, whole-of-government approach to defend a set of principles with willing and able allies and partners, there are still concerns that it may in fact be nothing more than a narrower, security-centric effort to counter China.¹⁵ Though some aspects of the latter approach would find support in a few Southeast Asian capitals, even Washington's closest partners realize that this would find fewer takers in the region because it risks fomenting divisions and leaves the demand for U.S. economic engagement unaddressed.¹⁶

The second challenge is doubts about the sustainability of the FOIP strategy. Part of this is a perception problem, where a high level of disarray in the Trump administration policymaking-wise and concerning actions taken on areas like trade have compounded regional skepticism about how far a FOIP strategy can be advanced in that context, thereby potentially limiting contributions that allies, partners and friends can make.¹⁷ But there is also a resource component of this challenge, particularly when it comes to cobbling together funds for the advancement of specific security, economic, and people-to-people initiatives in a domestic context. The administration has already discovered this as it has rolled out the economic aspects of the FOIP strategy, with criticisms expressed not only by commentators but also from Chinese officials as well who are keen to sow further doubts about its sustainability.¹⁸

The third and final challenge relates to the applicability of a FOIP strategy to regional conditions. As the United States looks to integrate Southeast Asia into a FOIP strategy, it has been difficult to do so when the region in some ways looks more unfree and closed than ever, with democracy on the retreat in some countries and ASEAN's difficulties on issues like the South China Sea looking ever clearer.¹⁹ For some Southeast Asian states, particularly those

facing elections or challenges such as rising populism or identity politics, there has been a tendency to either focus more on domestic affairs and engage with outside partners selectively rather than strategically, and this could not only continue but potentially intensify in the coming years.²⁰ This applies to not just U.S. partners like Indonesia, but also U.S. treaty allies, as evidenced by the unhelpful weakening of the Philippine position on the South China Sea under the leadership of President Rodrigo Duterte.

While managing these opportunities and challenges will not be easy for U.S. policymakers, that is exactly what will be required in order for Washington to successfully

officials is that FOIP will further divide the region into opposing camps and undermine ASEAN's much-prized centrality in managing major power competition.²³ At a recent forum in Jakarta, a senior Indonesian diplomat captured this sentiment well when he noted sternly that if the United States was truly interested in contributing to Southeast Asia's future, then it should "stop dividing the region."²⁴ Comity would help in helping assuage such concerns and project FOIP as a more collaborative and inclusive concept.

To be sure, FOIP does not apply to all ASEAN states equally, and the reality is that all ASEAN states are not created equal, and a FOIP strategy applies more to some than others. Nonetheless, U.S. policymakers ought to cast a wide net in their engagement to avoid unnecessarily alienating countries that may otherwise be open to the initiative and to prevent inadvertently undermining ASEAN while the initiative is in progress to prevent in-

various arrangements to advance collaboration within them would also be better suited to the diverse nature of countries in the region.

Achieving a well-rounded FOIP strategy will require stepping up ongoing efforts in the economic and people-to-people realms, be it better leveraging financial institutions at home and partners abroad to help with infrastructure development, or expanding the focus of already promising efforts such as the Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative. It will also mean thinking about advancing collaboration in strategic spaces within various parts of Southeast Asia, from the Sulu Sea in maritime Southeast Asia to the Mekong River in mainland Southeast Asia, using various bilateral, multilateral, and minilateral mechanisms.

Beijing—a natural tendency given its growing regional role—and more on making clear what Washington brings to the table and what terms it is setting for countries to engage with it relative to other actors. On democracy and human rights, though the United States should not be afraid to stick to its principles given the recent democratic setbacks we have seen in the region, U.S. policymakers should be flexible about how they advance these principles in accordance with the country in question. As we have witnessed with respect to a range of countries—from Thailand as a treaty ally to Malaysia as a partner—a mix of factors, including rising populist tendencies, China's growing influence, and serious economic and political challenges, requires an even more careful balance between advancing U.S. ideals and interests.

The fifth is *credibility*. While it is true that skepticism about follow through and resourcing tends to dog virtually any initiative coming out of Washington, the strategic consequences of such thinking in Southeast Asian capitals with respect to FOIP in particular cannot simply be written off. Doubts about sustainability can play into wider tendencies already at play among regional states, including intensifying hedging behavior to ride out a one-term holding pattern in U.S. policy that will end in the next election instead of making long-term strategic realignments now.²⁷ Irrespective of the rationale for such behavior, the point for U.S. policymakers is that it can have the net effect of limiting the contributions that allies, partners, and friends can make to FOIP, which does not advance U.S. interests.

Part of that can be accomplished by making greater investments in a FOIP strategy, leveraging resources across the board in government agencies, financial institutions, partners, as well as the U.S. Congress, whose role in Asia policy continues to remain central.²⁸ Irrespective of the structural constraints of

U.S. policy, any administration's rhetoric will be checked against the resources it puts into its strategy, and real change thus requires real investments. But the true test will come in the administration's ability to keep the focus on the FOIP strategy in general and Southeast Asia in particular over time, in spite a range of unforeseen crises that could emerge as well as other factors we tend to see across administrations such as bureaucratic inertia and personnel turnover. Managing potential frustrations with respect to reactions from individual Southeast Asian states and ASEAN as a whole will also not be easy, especially if ambivalence or resistance to FOIP persists despite U.S. efforts to adapt it to regional perceptions.

Conclusions

U.S. officials have done well to clearly articulate a vision for the Indo-Pacific in general and to recognize Southeast Asia's role within it in particular. But successfully integrating Southeast Asia into a FOIP strategy in the coming years is likely to prove a much more challenging task. It will mean recognizing the mix of opportunities and challenges that come with applying such a vision to a diverse, complex region, and managing that mix deftly in spite of limits, frustrations, and distractions along the way.

This is not to suggest that such a task is impossible. The United States still possesses significant strengths as a player in the Indo-Pacific, and there is still a widespread recognition in Southeast Asia of both the need for a strong U.S. presence in the region in general as well as agreement on areas of U.S. interest in particular. The key, as ever, will be how U.S. policymakers can leverage American strengths and regional demand signals to maximize the potential for engagement in U.S. relations with Southeast Asia and forge the

sorts of partnerships that can tackle common challenges and realize joint opportunities. That notion of partnership has long been a significant advantage for the United States, and it is one that Washington should utilize to its fullest.

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Endnotes

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- 4 For an earlier articulation of this strategic conception from Australia, see: Rory Medcalf, "The Indo-Pacific: What's in a Name?" *Asia Pacific Journal*, Volume 9, Number 2, October 10, 2013. The George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations also recognized the strategic convergence between the Indian and Pacific Oceans as well, even though steps such as articulations in the National Security Strategy and the change in the U.S. Pacific Command name were unique to the Trump administration. For an example, see Hillary Clinton's public articulation of the 'pivot' to Asia, where she notes, "How we translate the growing connection between the Indian and Pacific oceans into an operational concept is a question that we need to answer if we are to adapt to new challenges in the region." See: Hillary Clinton, "America's Pacific Century," *Foreign Affairs*, October 11, 2011.
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- 6 Conversation with U.S. official, Washington, D.C., August 2018.
- 7 Prashanth Parameswaran, "ASEAN's Divided Approach to China's Rise," *Asia Pacific Journal*, October 6, 2016; Joshua Kurlantzick, *China's Great Wall: A Strategy for Asia*, The Council on Foreign Relations Report, Washington, D.C., January 8, 2015.
- 8 Indeed, ASEAN itself has arguably been experiencing growing 'Indo-Pacificization' over the past few years, with member countries expediting the integration of major powers such as India, Australia, and the United States into some key regional meetings over time including the East Asia Summit which was inaugurated in 2005.
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- 16 See, for example: Vivian Balakrishnan, "Speech by Minister for Foreign Affairs Dr Vivian Balakrishnan During The Committee of Supply Debate," Ministry of Foreign Affairs Singapore, March 1, 2018.
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