

SCUSA 71 Table Paper: Indo-Pacific

The Indo-Pacific and South China Sea region includes the countries within and peripheral to the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. To gain greater familiarity with this immense area, participants should review the United States' 2019 Indo-Pacific Strategy Report (IPSR).¹ As a table discussing what US policy *ought to be* in the region as contrasted with the *status quo* of current US policy, SCUSA students should not consider themselves constrained by the current Indo-Pacific Strategy. However, they should be aware of its content and use it as a basic, initial platform for their deliberations on US policy.

The table's discussion questions are framed as follows:

The Indo-Pacific is one of the most populated and resource-rich areas in the world, as well as a hotbed for geopolitical competition. How should the United States engage with the largest democracy in the world, India, and cooperate with allies and partners in the region to manage the reemergence of an increasingly powerful and assertive China? How should the United States prioritize its national interests in the Indo-Pacific?

As we think about US foreign policy not only vis-à-vis the many countries in our table's region but from the perspective of domestic politics as well, we should think about the different potential foreign policy domestic constituencies or communities of interest within our country. While there is no such thing as clear cut and mutually exclusive domestic constituencies when it comes to US foreign policy, it is useful for our analysis to construct hypothetical categories that may help us to consider what the various domestic pressures and reactions might be for US policy vis-à-vis our regions and particular aspects of foreign policy. One approach is to think in terms of four hypothetical domestic constituencies: (1) Economic-Military Isolationist (EI); (2) Economic-Financial Globalist (EFG); (3) Values-Idealist (VI); and (4) neo-con interventionists (NCI).

For the economic military isolationists (EMI), what I have in mind is the constituency that has become more prominent in the national discourse since the 2016 election, partially associated with the "working class vote." It is generally assumed here that this "working class vote" has affinity for restrictive trade policies that are understood to benefit the American worker by encouraging companies to produce products in the United States rather than overseas. Contrasting with the EMI, we could think of economic financial globalist (EFG) as investment, business, entertainment, and other communities that may strongly favor the free flow of goods (and people) over international borders. They may feel that America can hold its own or thrive in a highly competitive world in which all international actors play by the same rules in a well-regulated rules-based order. They may be willing to accept temporary "cheating" by other countries in exchange for what they see as "long term" benefits, such as capturing overseas market share.

Values-idealist, an admittedly broad category of analysis, could represent a particular strain in American culture that believes in the goodness of the liberal-democratic system and individual freedom and is willing to make that a foreign policy priority. They may be more willing to eschew economic opportunities that require compromise of universal norms. For them, ongoing or imminent, concrete human rights disasters may serve as a sufficient reason for sanctions, boycotts, or even as a *casus belli* for direct military action. For instance, the US boycott of apartheid-era South Africa might

be said to reflect a VI position. The neo-con interventionists (NCI) includes several different categories, such as those who seek to avoid what they see as civilizational conflict as well as those who believe that American military power can be used quickly and decisively to quickly address particularly vexing international challenges. Of course, most real-life domestic constituencies simultaneously exhibit attributes of EMI, EFG, VI, and NCI, depending on what the issue is, so it is important to remember these are hypothetical, ideal-type categories we are using to incorporate domestic constituencies into our analysis

One country that has an impact on all the countries in our region is China. The People's Republic of China is the world's most powerful authoritarian country. The Communist Party which controls China has a tight grip on Chinese domestic media and increasingly uses its growing economic power to curtail criticism of its regime outside of China. The protests that now roil Hong Kong are more likely to prompt repression by the Party than political compromise and reform.² Sound analysis of Chinese domestic and international behavior should help us understand whether western assumptions of the past three decades that modernization would lead China to gradually embrace liberalism, if not democracy, were mistaken. But if these assumptions were mistaken or premature, to what extent should we cooperate with China on issues of mutual, regional, or global concern?

China's client-state of North Korea continues to represent a challenge for the entire Indo-Asia-Pacific region. Here is a state that has no rule of law, starves its own people, as well as abducts and murders foreign citizens.³ North Korea does not really come into play for the EFG constituency because it is too poor and backwards to take American jobs or buy American products. The US-North Korea policy will be most salient for (E)MI, VI, and NCI-related domestic constituencies. Key issues to discuss here are broad policies and opportunities regarding de-nuclearization⁴ as well as enforcing of United Nations Security Council Resolutions (UNSCR) by disrupting illicit ship-to-ship transfers, often near or in Chinese territorial waters and in the Yellow Sea.⁵ US credibility vis-à-vis our allies (e.g., Japan, South Korea) who are threatened by North Korea is also a major consideration here. This gets complicated when friends such as Taiwan are involved in sanction-running. Even more so than the case with China's Communist leaders, our policy discussions should assume bad faith on the part of the Kim dynasty and require strict verification protocols in any policy that involves coordination with that regime.

Our analysis should be especially mindful of our allies and other countries with close affinity with US values – those countries that not only formally share universal political-philosophical values with the US but that the US could also count among its friends. Here, I suggest two things: first, that US power in the region stems primarily from our relationship with allies and friends; and two, the United States must make itself a reliable, trustworthy partner for our friends and allies. For example, withdrawing from the TPP after our allies expended significant domestic political capital based on previous US promises is the kind of behavior that can be self-defeating.⁶ Our policy towards the region should offer these countries viable alternatives to accommodating China's growing power.

Japan is a US treaty ally and a cornerstone of the current US Treaty-Ally structure. Japan's Self Defense Forces and US forces are fully inter-operational and engage in extensive intelligence sharing. Japan, along with the United States, India, and Australia, is also a member of the Quad, a "dialogue between like-minded democratic countries" seeking to keep the Indo-Pacific "free and open" from Chinese coercive practices. The reaction of the various domestic constituencies to the development of the US

economic relationship with Japan since the 1940's demonstrates how different concerns become salient with different groups at different times and for different reasons. After World War II, the United States worked to bolster Japan economically by encouraging its turn towards an export-oriented economy and by opening US markets to Japanese goods. For values constituencies opposed to Soviet/Chinese Communist aggression, strengthening post-war Japan had a significant appeal.

Today's NCI-oriented constituency would have probably agreed with the basing of large numbers of US troops in Japan after WWII and with the United States' direct intervention that explicitly reshaped Japan into a liberal democracy (although one with strong Japanese cultural characteristics), including the United States' writing of the current Japanese constitution. While it seems like a distant memory now, however, we should also recall the severe backlash from the EMI constituency in the 1980's, who were bolstered by EFG frustrated by the perception that Japan refused to open its markets fully to US competition. Many Americans can still remember the public's angst when the Japanese purchased Rockefeller Center. Domestic constituencies took a keen interest in these events and helped drive changes in US policy towards Japan. Moreover, the US domestic perception that Japan was taking unfair advantage of the US economically was a big deal until it wasn't. (Although, this idea of Japan taking unfair advantage of the US-provided military defense was revived during the 2016 election).

Japan is a powerful, self-restrained country that has uniquely agreed that the US will exercise a significant degree of control over what would normally be considered its sovereign national defense responsibilities. If necessary, Japan could be a strong military ally in a conflict with China and a deterrent for the expansion of China's current military probes in the South China Sea and beyond. Yet, as with most countries in the region, China is Japan's largest trading partner. Still, the Chinese Communists frequently villainize the Japanese people to the Chinese, often for domestic political purposes. North Korea, long a concern for Japan with its occasional kidnapping of Japanese citizens and forays into terrorism has now evolved into a full-on security threat with its development of nuclear weapons and frequent missile tests. Japan also looks to the US for a way forward against the Chinese Communists' expanding claims and aggressive actions in the Sea of Japan and the South China Sea (freedom of navigation is important economically for Japan). At the same time, Japan's relations with fellow US ally South Korea are deteriorating due in part to long-standing historical grievances.

Australia is also a US Treaty Ally and has fought with the United States in every war from World War I to Afghanistan and Iraq. Along with Japan, it is the most reliable friend the United States has in the region. The practical security relationship has become even stronger since the signing of the Force Posture Agreement in 2014. The best US military platforms like the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, the P-8, and the MV-22 are all fielded in the Australian armed forces and Australia is a regular participant in joint military exercises with the US such as Talisman Saber, RIMPAC. Australia could be an important ally for purposes of resisting Chinese attempts at military and economic hegemony in the region, but following the US lead in the 1990's, Australia has also allowed itself to become more dependent on the Chinese Communists in its economy and regional diplomacy.

Although the Australian economy is heavily reliant on China and there exists extensive cultural and civic interaction between the two societies, there is also increasing resentment in Australia against the Communist Party's attempts at heavy-handed influence in the Australian political process.⁷ We have reason to expect that Australia will continue to be a reliable US partner. New Zealand, once part of

the ANZUS treaty relationship with Australia and the US, is also an important consideration in its own right.⁸ New Zealand's "Pacific Reset" policy dovetails well with Australian efforts at regional cooperation and the US security relationship with New Zealand is probably at its best since the mid 1980's.⁹ To Australia's north, an example of how US interaction with Papua New Guinea may be important can be found in the joint modernization of the Lombrum Naval Base on Manus Island to push back against China's expanding presence in South East Asia.¹⁰

Many of the same considerations that the US has vis-à-vis Japan also apply to US policy towards the Republic of Korea, another US Treaty-Ally. The level of integration between the US forces stationed in Korea and the Korean armed forces is second to none.¹¹ At the same time, Korea's economic reliance on China, its simmering conflict with Japan, and conflicted relationship with North Korea could make it an unreliable partner under certain conditions. The US must understand and respond to the fact that South Korea relies significantly on China as its largest trading partner and will continue to have a conflicted relationship with North Korea. The US should work as an honest broker mitigating the conflict between Japan and the ROK. At the same time, the US has a right to assurances in the form of concrete statement and actions from the ROK that the ROK's dependence on China and unique relationship with North Korea will not trump or interfere with the US-ROK Treaty Relationship.

Taiwan, a Chinese speaking island off the coast of China, should be counted as a friend of the United States, but its own extensive economic ties with China and the tinderbox of China-Taiwan relations put it in a precarious spot. Still, from a VI perspective, Taiwan is a thriving liberal-democracy, rule-of-law country. While the US does not formally recognize Taiwan as a "country," through the US domestic legal framework of the Taiwan Relations Act, the Taiwan Travel Act, various foreign military sales programs, the US not only treats Taiwan like a country, but a liberal-democratic country worthy of respect (e.g., Taiwan is part of the visa-free entry program for tourists coming to the US).¹²

In considering policy, big business and supply chains, including TSM, and other companies, also might impact the reactions of EMI and EFG constituencies to US economic policies vis-à-vis Taiwan. At first glance it seems that EFG should be enthusiastic about greater free trade with Taiwan. Yet American corporate interests, such as Apple and other large companies that have deep ties with Taiwan (e.g., Apple's subcontractor Foxconn), are often keenly responsive to China's Communist Party (e.g., Apple Maps in China lists the entire South China Sea as belonging to China) and have shown a willingness to completely disregard liberal democratic values to earn Party-controlled dollars. Thus, EFG's response to closer ties with Taiwan may be affected by the Communist Party's response to any change in US policy towards Taiwan.

India looms especially large in our region, especially because it seems that US policy should encourage India to provide some type of balancing function against China's efforts in the region. It is often billed as the world's largest democracy, and it is; although recent "populist" Hindu-nationalism ("Hindutva") under Modi and aggressive actions in Kashmir should be cause for concern among VI constituency.¹³ The US describes its relationship with India as a "Major Defense Partnership," and that claim is substantiated by such things as the establishment of the 2+2+ Ministerial Dialogue as well as the signing of the Communications, Compatibility and Security Agreement,¹⁴ but at the same time India has traditionally jealously guarded its non-aligned status and would likely not consider itself a US ally.¹⁵

According to the IPSR:

The United States and India share a common outlook on the Indo-Pacific. Both countries recognize the importance of the Indo-Pacific to global trade and commerce and acknowledge that developments in this region will shape the larger trajectory of the rules-based international order.

The United States and India maintain a broad-based strategic partnership, underpinned by shared interests, democratic values, and strong people-to-people ties. The U.S.-India strategic partnership has strengthened significantly during the past two decades, based on a convergence of strategic interests, and the United States and India continue to use their deepening relationship to build new partnerships within and beyond the Indo-Pacific.

While this statement presents a positive picture, what should the US position be on concrete initiatives such as India's participation in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) as well as India's Look East/Act East policies?¹⁶ As far as US constituencies, the US should also be aware of potential limitations to using economic incentives such as preferential access to US markets to building closer relations, as it might have done in the past (for instance, allowing preferential access to the US market for Japan to rebuild that country after World War II). As demonstrated by the fate of the TPP, the EMI constituency in the US may oppose economic policies that seek to increase security but are seen as a disadvantage to the American worker.

The ASEAN nations -- Indonesia, Vietnam, Cambodia, Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei, Philippines, Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand -- are also extremely important in our region. First, we must exercise some caution to not artificially treat such a diverse group of countries as a single entity. For instance, the Philippines has a very unique historical relationship with the United States that affects any policy. With the establishment of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) in December 2015 between these 10 member states, there also exists the possibility for a single market which would allow for the free movement of goods, skilled labor, services, and investment.¹⁷ These countries represent the majority of claimants in the South China Sea which gives them a significant stake in one of the greatest potential conflicts involving China's territorial expansiveness. In terms of domestic US opinion, increased trade -- especially direct investment by US companies oriented towards making products which will be exported back to the US market -- runs the risk of eliciting a negative reaction from the EMI constituency. For the VI constituency, each of these countries must be considered individually (e.g., genocide in Myanmar, widespread extrajudicial killings in the Philippines under President Duterte).

The Philippines has a significant and close history with the United States as well as a Mutual Defense Treaty and the 2014 Enhanced Defense Agreement. It is not perceived as an economic threat to US workers. Recent democratic backsliding, however, with its implication for human rights, is not only of concern to a VI domestic constituency, but is also potentially of concern to a NCI constituency that sees the Chinese as taking advantage of this democratic backsliding to increase their own influence in the region. Such concerns would find evidence in Duterte's abandonment of the South China Sea Arbitral decision right after he came to power in 2016.¹⁸ In fact, the Philippines well demonstrates how China benefits from the rise of illiberal governments in the region. While the United States has increased military ties with Cambodia, that country has also seen recent democratic backsliding.

Similarly, China is seeking to establish bases or a military presence on Cambodia's coast. Arguably, Burmese human rights atrocities in northern Rakhine State, the West's criticism of Burma's action, and China's increasing influence in Burma are not unrelated.

The United States has long had close military relationships with Thailand and Singapore. For instance, Thailand provided the United States the use of Utapao Royal Thai Naval Air Station and the associated deep-water port at Sattahip. While Thailand continues to fall prey to military coups, its internal situation has not been a salient issue for America's EI constituencies. Singapore has always been in an interesting position vis-à-vis the United States. Singapore has a very close relationship with the United States, and it has always been careful to walk a fine line in its relationship with China. Both the 2005 Strategic Framework Agreement, and the 2015 U.S. Singapore Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement suggest the continuing strength of that agreement, as do the "Our Eyes" initiative: exchange of information in the maritime domain among partners. Yet, Singapore has shown an increased willingness to openly criticize US actions on the trade war in what could be interpreted as taking China's side.

Despite the tragic legacy of the Vietnam War, the United States and Vietnam are surprisingly close, driven in large part by Vietnam's awareness of the long-term threat posed by China. At this time, Vietnam and China are engaged in a significant standoff over drillings rights in the South China Sea. This is only the most recent of a long series of conflicts, some of which have escalated into violence. Moreover, since China claims the entire south China Sea including the Vietnamese littoral, it is unlikely that this conflict is going away any time soon. The general feeling has been that Vietnam's wariness of China is pushing it closer towards the US. In addition, it is currently thought that the recent US tariff increase has resulted in the US and other companies shifting from Chinese manufacturing to Vietnamese manufacturing.¹⁹ If this is true, while it may drive the US and Vietnam closer together in the short turn, it also risks inciting the same E(M)I communities which currently support increased tariffs on Chinese goods taking the same approach with Vietnam. Under these conditions, the best course of action may to focus even more on providing security assistance to Vietnam,²⁰ although such aid may also pose special challenges stemming from the particular history between the United States and the current Vietnamese government. Before tying ourselves to Vietnam's Communist leaders, no matter what the perceived short terms benefits, we should carefully reflect on the origins of our current disputes with the Chinese Communists.

Two ASEAN countries which do risk attracting negative attention from the EMI are Indonesia and Malaysia. Currently the U.S.-Indonesia Comprehensive Partnership shows promise to provide a balance against China.²¹ As for Malaysia, joint patrols in international waters, the annual US-Malaysia CARAT Naval exercise and Southeast Asia Cooperation Training Exercises demonstrate stability in the relationship and potential for future cooperation. According to the US Navy, "the CARAT exercise focuses on the full spectrum of naval capabilities and is designed to strengthen the close partnership between both navies while cooperatively ensuring maritime security, stability and prosperity."²²

Both of these high populous countries have the potential to provide cheap, loosely regulated labor for American manufacturing on a large scale. For the EG constituency, losing its traditional China manufacturing grounds, this may provide an attraction; but, for the same reason, any major shift of American manufacturing to Indonesia and Malaysia also risks the displeasure of the EI constituency.

Laos could also be an important partner in the non-militarization of the South China Sea²³ if the US strengthens the US-Mongolia defense relationship and economic ties, for instance, by more enacting measures like the Third-Neighbor Trade Act.²⁴

How should the United States interact with Pacific Island Nations? On this point, please review the recent RAND Study, “America's Pacific Island Allies, The Freely Associated States and Chinese Influence.”²⁵ Direct financial aid, continued security support, invitations to participate in USINDOPACOM's KOA MOANA, and PACIFIC PATHWAYS exercises are all readily available policy tools and could provide a balance against the assistance offered by the Chinese Communists. Should the US increase military engagements with Sri Lanka, like the Bilateral Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT) Exercise? Does the current US policy of providing capacity-building opportunities to the Maldives National Defense Forces and Coast Guard make sense? What about the increase of Foreign Military Financing (FMF)?²⁶ What are the best ways to assist the Maldives to escape China's debt trap?²⁷ The U.S. Army Pacific-led Land Forces Talks with Nepal as well as visits to Nepal by the USINDOPACOM commander and Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for the South and Southeast Asia could be models for integration and engagement with smaller countries in the region.²⁸ Also of interest and concern are the countries on India's geographical and cultural periphery, such as Bangladesh and Bhutan. Should the US encourage India to provide greater support to Bhutan? Are current US ties with highly populous but impoverished Bhutan – the annual Bilateral Defense Dialogue,²⁹ US-provided financing and grants for International Military Education and Training (IMET), Inclusion of Bangladesh in the Maritime Security Initiative (MSI), and engagement under the CARAT format – sufficient?

As this very general overview suggests, the region under review is extremely complex and any policy recommendations must take into account the interests and values of different US constituencies. Although it is impossible to provide detailed suggestions for each country, ideally US policy should be true to our values. It should advance the free flow of commerce, ideas, and people in ways that do not strengthen authoritarian regimes that violate human rights and work against the international rules-based order. Although policy recommendations are unlikely to satisfy all domestic constituencies, we should seek to minimize disagreement among groups and craft policies that are beneficial for the United States and for the world.

Endnotes

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