

Essay

Unpacking the Trump Administration's New Indo-Pacific Strategy

Jeff M Smith

Since its unveiling on June 1, America's new Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) has attracted great interest at home and abroad. It's been a long time coming. In 2017 the Trump administration began gradually unveiling a vision for a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" but the State Department strategy document informing the vision remained classified. After a great deal of speculation, the U.S. Department of Defense unveiled a formal Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) document at the annual Shangri La Dialogue in Singapore this year.

The IPS was comprehensive in nature, outlining U.S. priorities and challenges across the super-theater stretching from "the west coast of the United States to the western shores of India." It wastes no time establishing America's claim to be an Indo-Pacific power. With five states and four territories bordered by the Pacific Ocean, the U.S. does \$2.3 trillion in trade with the region annually, where it has contributed \$1.3 trillion in Foreign Direct Investment [FDI]—"more than China's, Japan's and South Korea's [FDI] combined." The first full-time deployment of a U.S. warship to the region, it reminds us, was approved in 1817. Perhaps most important, the IPS unequivocally identifies the Indo-Pacific as "the single most consequential region for America's future" while repeatedly underscoring the value of U.S. allies and multilateral security partnerships. It clarifies that, rather than pursuing hegemony, the U.S. encourages the emergence of multiple power centers in the Indo-Pacific—ideally poles like Japan and India, invested in the international system, the rule of law, and democracy. Moreover, the IPS helps underscore the bipartisan, whole-of-government approach to American objectives in the region, including the U.S. Congress' stamp on regional policy via the U.S. Maritime Security Initiative and the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act of 2018.

Jeff M. Smith is a Research Fellow at The Heritage Foundation in Washington DC specializing in South Asia.

The IPS devotes individual sections to threat actors where China and Russia receive prominent placement, as they did in previous strategy documents. Smartly, the IPS also includes separate sections for U.S. allies and security partners and avoids neglecting the “Indo” half of the Indo-Pacific, with some individual attention given to South Asian “middle powers” like Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and Bangladesh. The document also offers a new Pentagon-inspired slogan—Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region—while providing a slightly modified version of the principles underlying the administration’s Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision. They now include:

1. Respect for sovereignty and independence of all nations;
2. Peaceful resolution of disputes;
3. Free, fair, and reciprocal trade based on open investment, transparent agreements, and connectivity; and,
4. Adherence to international rules and norms, including those of freedom of navigation and overflight.

Fortunately, the IPS also touches upon some newer regional policy priorities for the Trump administration. They include: Chinese activities in the polar regions; the rising importance of the Pacific Islands as a theater of competition; a new emphasis on promoting Coast Guard cooperation in the region; a new focus on infrastructure and connectivity issues following the passage of the BUILD Act; an explicit acknowledgement of the interests and role of non-resident powers like Canada, France, and the UK; and a public repudiation of China’s repressive policies in Xinjiang.

While it was rumored to be under debate, the IPS shows the Trump administration has decided to keep a more narrow geographic definition of the Indo-Pacific as extending to

Unsurprisingly, India gets significant attention in the IPS...

the west coast of India (rather than the east coast of Africa, as defined by India and Japan). Both definitions have their merits but the more expansive one more appropriately encompasses China’s growing interests and activities in the western Indian

Ocean, Pakistan, and the East African coast.

India and China

Unsurprisingly, India gets significant attention in the IPS, which explicitly underscores the importance of the India-U.S. Defense Technology and Trade Initiative

(DTTI) and welcomes the inauguration of a new Indian maritime information fusion center. In describing the relationship, it explains:

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 represents a strong endorsement of the partnership it falls somewhat short of the language used in the 2017 National Security Strategy. The NSS states: “We welcome India’s emergence as a leading global power and stronger strategic and defense partner.” The U.S., it said, would “support India’s growing relationships throughout the region” and “support its leadership role in Indian Ocean security.”

At the other end of the spectrum, China is also a major focus of the IPS. As the Heritage Foundation’s Walter Lohman writes, the strategy document: “puts China in an overwhelmingly competitive light. It quite directly states the Chinese objective—‘Indo-Pacific hegemony’—and America’s intention ‘to reorder the region to its advantage.’” Notably, the IPS also condemns the “PRC’s systematic mistreatment of Uighurs, Kazakhs, and other Muslims in Xinjiang – including pervasive discrimination, mass detention, and disappearances.” It claims China “undermines the international system from within by exploiting its benefits while simultaneously eroding the values and principles of the rules-based order.” Not all of the language on China is confrontational. The IPS observes that “one of the most far-reaching objectives of the National Defense Strategy is to set the military relationship between the United States and China on a long-term path of transparency and non-aggression.” And amid growing U.S. criticism of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the IPS clarifies that the U.S. “does not oppose China’s investment activities as long as they respect sovereignty and the rule of law, use responsible financing practices, and operate in a transparent and economically sustainable manner.”

Shortfalls of the IPS

There is little in the IPS that represents a sharp break with past U.S. policies and priorities. As with prior strategy documents from the Trump administration, it was written by professionals with a nuanced understanding of the region. And to its credit, it adds several new points of emphasis merited by the changing regional landscape. So, where does the IPS invite criticism? The focus on Russia seems more suited to providing consistency with other

policy documents than reflecting ground realities. While the Russia-U.S. relationship has grown more antagonistic in recent years, the competition, and Russia's malignant activities, are playing out largely outside the theater of the Indo-Pacific, where Russia's presence and influence remain marginal, even if they're growing slowly.

Second, the strategy document would also benefit from offering more substance on actual U.S. strategy in the region. On Sri Lanka, for example, it's laudable the IPS devotes time to recent developments and U.S. initiatives on the island, but it doesn't articulate specific U.S. objectives and interests there, or a strategy for achieving them. More substantive criticism of the IPS will come not from the document's substance, but from the way the Trump Administration's policies and pronouncements have at times failed to align with the policy frameworks it has meticulously crafted. The problem extends beyond the U.S. president's ability to sow confusion or signal an abrupt policy shift with a presidential tweet. At times different branches of the government have seemingly worked at cross-purposes, exposing a sub-optimal interagency coordination process and a lack of regional expertise at key policy positions left unconfirmed.

Misfiring with India

This has become an increasingly acute concern in the context of India-U.S. ties. It is often referred to as a cornerstone of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific but the administration has hampered confidence-building and strategic convergence by threatening India with sanctions for purchasing Iranian oil and Russian defense hardware.

In 2018 the administration applied tariffs on steel and aluminum imports from India on dubious national security grounds and, in the middle of India's national elections, revoked duty free access for select Indian exports under the Generalized System of Preferences. Frustrated at the two sides' failure to reach and trade and investment deal that would have addressed some longstanding U.S. economic grievances, the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative has put India in its crosshairs. It is rumored to be considering an expansive "Section 301" investigation of India that could prompt a new wave of escalating tariffs. To add fuel to the fire, there's a new fault line emerging over Indian proposals governing data localization policies opposed by the U.S. government and private industry.

Individually, the administration's moves don't lack merit. Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) sanctions were imposed on the Trump administration by a U.S. Congress determined to punish Russia for electoral interference. The global Iran sanctions don't specifically target India; indeed, its close partnership with the U.S. helped it secure a six-month waiver. Many of the trade and investment grievances aired

by the administration are neither novel nor unreasonable. Stringent Indian data localization policies could put it on the wrong side of an emerging divide over the future of the internet, surrounded by autocratic governments that tightly control information. Yet, the way in which the administration has approached these divides has lacked sophistication and strategic vision. At times its combative approach has undermined other administration priorities and risks damaging the long-term strategic partnership with India. If China is indeed the strategic competitor of the U.S. envisioned by the IPS and other administration pronouncements, the Indo-U.S. strategic partnership is of paramount importance, and should inform how other policy priorities are pursued. Washington insists it won't force choices on its Indo-Pacific partners, instead leading by example, but to Delhi it at times looks like it is being forced to choose.

At times its combative approach has undermined other administration priorities and risks damaging the long-term strategic partnership with India.

Conclusion

Despite these reservations, the IPS offers one important takeaway that should be reassuring to U.S. partners, including India. It signals continuity and consistency in America's approach to the region: consistency with decades-long U.S. policy priorities and principles and with the administration's own National Defense Strategy and National Security Strategy. Even if the U.S. president at times appears unbound by these frameworks, they nevertheless provide important policy guidance to the immense U.S. bureaucracy, helping to shape everything from military planning to the guidance issued to U.S. diplomats. They also offer important signaling mechanisms to partners and adversaries alike.

The IPS offers a stark reminder that America's Indo-Pacific commitment reflects the views of the various arms of the U.S. government -- from the U.S. Congress to the State and Defense departments, the private sector and think tank communities, the U.S. military, the intelligence community, and the collective will of the American people. America was, is, and will remain an Indo-Pacific power. The administration's ability to advance America's interests there—and sustain its critical partnership with India—will depend on how well it can adhere to its own strategy guidance.