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## ASIA VALUES: A FREE AND OPEN INDO-PACIFIC

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The Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy is touted by the White House as a continuity of United States policy aimed at protecting American interests in that vital region of the world.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has claimed that it was first announced by President Donald Trump at the 2017 APEC CEO Summit in Vietnam, and subsequently detailed in the *National Security Strategy*. In fact, the concept of an FOIP was first floated by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in India ten years earlier.

The motivation for the FOIP is the rise of China, and all that follows from that. Beijing's activist diplomacy, particularly through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has led to a reassessment of strategic options in capitals across the globe. China's so called 9-Dash Line claims, and military activities in the South China Sea have heightened concerns in other regional and maritime nations which rely heavily on the sea lanes that run through that crucial body of water.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), four of whose ten member states have overlapping claims against China, has been affected by Chinese actions in the South China Sea. The grouping has managed to maintain a relatively peaceful and prosperous Southeast Asia through an approach based on open and inclusive regionalism.

For Washington, the Indo-Pacific means the west coast of the United States to the west coast of India. In Tokyo, it is from the west coast of the United States to the east coast of Africa. The United States has emphasized the power dynamics underlying the FOIP while Japan has highlighted its economic

potential. To Japan, the FOIP is open to all countries which observe the rule of law, freedom of navigation, and relevant standards of transparency and sustainable development. While stressing that no one is excluded, the United States aspires to a regional order of independent nations in the Indo-Pacific that defends its populations, respects human dignity, competes fairly in the market place, and is free from great-power domination. Thus, it may not be easy for China to be part of the FOIP even if Beijing wished to be included.

Chinese officials see nothing new in the FOIP, viewing it as merely a different name for the Obama Administration's pivot to Asia, and a change in the name and reach of the US Pacific Command, now the US Indo-Pacific Command.

Some Chinese circles view the inclusion of India in the FOIP as a silver lining. To them, India can be a strategic counter-weight, moderating any tendencies towards China-US confrontation and contestation in Asia.

India's calculations about the FOIP are far-reaching. India supports Japan's geographical definition of the Indo-Pacific as it goes all the way to East Africa, thereby including Iran as well. This could have serious implications for the United States in view of the animosity shown by the Trump Administration towards Tehran, although it is unclear how far India will go to defend its interests with Iran and in the Persian Gulf. The FOIP initiative may well be complicated by India's moves to prevent China from gaining more ground in the Indian Ocean.

Secretary Pompeo has stated that ASEAN is at the center of Indo-Pacific geography, and it will therefore play a central role in the FOIP. Responding to ASEAN concerns that the FOIP may be too security oriented, he announced US plans to provide millions of dollars in development programmes for ASEAN, something Chinese commentators have scoffed at in comparison to China's multi-billion dollar BRI projects. However, Secretary Pompeo is demonstrating that the Trump Administration's foreign policy, at least that relating to Asia and the Pacific, is not isolationist.

The question for ASEAN is how it keeps intact its open regionalism in the wake of the FOIP, and its objective of preventing Southeast Asia from becoming an arena of big-power rivalry. It wants to be friends with everyone. If the FOIP is perceived as a containment move against China, it will be hard for ASEAN to be involved.

Eventually, ASEAN may see no alignment with the Trump Administration on the FOIP notwithstanding that the United States, Japan, India and Australia have reaffirmed ASEAN's centrality and its importance in advancing the FOIP. In that case, ASEAN might well be branded as being subservient to China's interests. This could become a drag on the US-ASEAN partnership as well as the long-term sustainability of China-ASEAN relations.

ASEAN has distanced itself from the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) started in 2007 by Japan, the United States, Australia and India. This is a separate joint military initiative, highlighted by "Exercise Malabar" in the Indian Ocean. When Kevin Rudd took over as Prime Minister of Australia in 2007, he withdrew from the Quad and it became dormant. Australia returned to the Quad in 2017 when then Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull met his counterparts from the United States, Japan and India on the side lines of the ASEAN Summit in Manila to restart the Quad's activities.

The existing strategic order in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean is being transformed. Yet, the FOIP is still nebulous. Japan's role is important and much depends on Tokyo's perception of how its interests are affected by developments in the Korean Peninsula. The trend suggests discord and divergence will continue. Intensifying electoral campaigning in Australia, India, Indonesia, Japan and the United States will also impinge on the search for stability and strategic cooperation.

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