

The US Indo-Pacific Strategy and China's Response

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Abstract

The US-China relationship defines geopolitics in the 21st century. Despite a messy start, the Trump administration was able to provide a new national security strategy within the first year in office. The new US national security strategy clearly defines China as a strategic rival that “challenges American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity.” For the first time, the United States outlined an Indo-Pacific strategy to compete with and contain China’s rising power and influence among those countries along the Indian and Pacific oceans. As part of an overall competitive strategy vis-à-vis China, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo called for “a new alliance of democracies” against China in the international community. The Chinese government has yet to officially respond to the US Indo-Pacific strategy as well as the “free and open Indo-Pacific” concept. Ten years ago, when the Obama administration rolled out the “pivot to Asia” strategy, Beijing’s answer was a grand geoeconomic plan to expand Chinese economic power along the ancient Silk Roads on land and sea. Ten years later, how will Beijing respond to the new strategic challenge from Washington? In this article, the authors argue that Beijing has not taken tit-for-tat action to respond to the US Indo-Pacific Strategy. Instead, China has responded to the new American challenge in a more constructive, peaceful, and

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nonconfrontational manner. Beijing's objective is to mitigate possible national security risks while continuing to extend its international influence in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond.

President Donald Trump unveiled a new US vision for a "free and open Indo-Pacific region" during his 12-day visit to Asia in November 2017.¹ In the following month, the Trump administration published a new US national security strategy report, in which China is defined as a strategic rival that threatens US national security in the Indo-Pacific region. The report also outlined an Indo-Pacific strategy (IPS) for the United States and areas for priority actions on countering China's rising influence in both the Indian Ocean and the Pacific.² By echoing Japan's "free and open Indo-Pacific framework" and India's Go-East policy, the release of the US IPS has reactivated the regional security debate in Asia. It has given currency to the ongoing debate over how China's BRI activities and renewed major power competition are shaping the regional order. Following Beijing's enacting a new national security law for Hong Kong in June 2020, Washington took the opportunity to further strengthen the international alliance against China in the region.³

The Chinese government has yet to issue any formal response to the concept of the "free and open Indo-Pacific" and the US IPS. There is no doubt that the pressure and challenge brought up by the new US IPS are huge. Many Chinese international relations (IR) scholars are becoming concerned about the negative impacts created by the new US strategy on China's IR and China-US relations. Many research reports and articles have been published on this topic. Yet most of these publications are policy analyses, and very few provide a good conceptual framework for analyzing China's strategic response to the US IPS. In this article we take stock and classify these analyses into different groups. We enlighten our readers on the best ways to interpret China's response to the US IPS and how that would affect the China-US strategic competition in the foreseeable future.

1. The "Free and Open Indo-Pacific": From Concept to Strategy

The concept of "Indo-Pacific," like "Asia-Pacific," is a geostrategic construct. Geographically, the Indo-Pacific refers to a large maritime region of warm water connecting the Indian and Pacific oceans.