

We need a rules-based Indo-Pacific

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Economically and strategically, the global centre of gravity is shifting to the Indo-Pacific region. Security dynamics and power relationships are changing rapidly in this region. Two recent summits underscore the changing dynamics — one between Chinese President Xi Jinping and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in Beijing, and the other between Abe and Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Japan.

Japan and India have reason to try and improve strained ties with China. But as China has come under greater US pressure on trade, technology and other fronts, it has proactively sought to ease tensions with Japan and India. Indeed, in response to the mounting US pressure, Xi this month emphasised his personal relationship with US President Donald Trump and called for “a plan that both can accept”.

This underscores how active American pressure, as opposed to mere admonitions, can result in improving China’s behaviour. When a nation pursues an accommodating approach toward Beijing, an emboldened China ups the ante. But while deference usu-

ally invites bullying, standing up to China draws respect and a readiness to negotiate and make concessions.

Trump’s predecessor, Barack Obama, unveiled his “pivot” to Asia in 2011. The pivot attracted a lot of international attention but had little impact in shaping the regional geostrategic landscape. For example, it did nothing to tame China’s territorial and maritime revisionism. In fact, it was on Obama’s watch, after he had unveiled the pivot, that China created and militarised islands in the South China Sea, thereby fundamentally transforming the situation there.

The Trump administration’s “free and open Indo-Pacific” strategy, with its clearer vision and objectives, looks like the true pivot to Asia. This is largely because of the paradigm shift underway in America’s China policy. For decades, the US pursued a policy of aiding China’s economic rise in the hope that a more prosperous China would liberalise economically and politically. Now, despite the US becoming more polarised and divided than ever, a bipartisan consensus has emerged there that this policy approach was based on wishful thinking and must be replaced with active and concrete counteraction.

The inclusion of the Indian Ocean in the Trump administration’s Indo-Pacific strategy is partly a response to China’s Belt and Road Initiative, whose largest investments are concentrated in the Indian Ocean Rim. The Indian Ocean is also becoming the centre of Beijing’s geostrategic focus after its success in changing the South China Sea status quo.



■ Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe (left) and Chinese president Xi Jinping GETTY

The real architect of the “free and open Indo-Pacific” concept, however, is Abe, who unveiled that idea more than two years ago in Nairobi. US foreign policy traditionally has not embraced a concept authored by a foreign leader. The US adoption of the “free and open Indo-Pacific” concept is a rare exception.

Washington’s Indo-Pacific strategy, however, faces some tough challenges, not least because of the hedging policies of some US allies. Caught between an unpredictable and transactional Trump administration and an arrogant and pushy China, some US friends find themselves between a rock and a hard place. Moreover, some US allies, including Australia and South Korea, view their eco-

nomical relations with China to be as important as their security ties with the US. The last thing they want is for American policy to force them to choose between the US and China. America’s own neutrality on disputes between China and its neighbours, including in the South and East China seas and the Himalayas, encourages its friends to play balance or hedge their bets.

Another challenge for Washington relates specifically to the South China Sea, a highly strategic corridor connecting the Indian and Pacific oceans. How can the Indo-Pacific be “free” and “open” when its most-important sea corridor is neither free nor open?

To be sure, this is a difficult challenge. How can the US, at this stage, undo what China has done in the South China Sea without provoking war? Moreover, the Trump administration’s stepped-up freedom-of-navigation operations in the corridor neither credibly deter China nor reassure America’s regional allies. Without a clear plan to deal with the changing status quo there, the South China Sea will remain a critical missing link in Trump’s larger Indo-Pacific strategy.

Meanwhile, the Australia-India-Japan-US “quad”, despite the hype, has yet to live up to its promise. The quad needs to acquire concrete shape and content. No ministerial-level meeting has been held thus far. This may explain why the quad’s institutionalisation has yet to take off.

More fundamentally, progress on building a rules-based Indo-Pacific order is linked to addressing the regional imperative for strategic equilibrium. Playing by international rules and not seeking to redraw borders by force are central to peace and security.

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The views expressed are personal*