

A U.S. View on Maritime Security in the Indo-Pacific

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The purpose of this paper is to provide an American point of view on maritime security in the Indo-Pacific.¹ The United States has taken nearly a decade to change its articulation of U.S. interests in this region, expanding its vision from the “Asia-Pacific” to the “Indo-Pacific.” This evolution can be traced to recognition of the increasing importance of India, and by extension the Indian Ocean, in U.S. strategy. Yet, despite this shift, U.S. interests are still firmly entrenched in the Pacific, with the Indian Ocean remaining a secondary area of focus.

From the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific

For decades, the United States has characterized its strategic interests in Asia as being in the “Asia-Pacific.”² This conception reflected the United States’ proximity to the Pacific Ocean and its historical interests in continental East Asia. In 2012, the Obama administration began experimenting with a new articulation of its regional interests as extending beyond the Asia-Pacific. The State Department began referring to the potential for an “Indo-Pacific economic corridor” to connect South and Southeast Asia.³ The following year, the commander of U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM) ADM Samuel Locklear began referring to this region as the “Indo-Asia-Pacific” to characterize the expanse of U.S. interests in his area of responsibility (AOR).⁴

The term Indo-Asia-Pacific finally acknowledged the fact that the AOR had long included the Indian Ocean. However, this shift in terminology also reflected an ongoing U.S. policy effort to emphasize the elevated importance of India to U.S. strategic interests. The U.S. *Defense Strategic Guidance* issued in January 2012 had discussed India and characterized U.S. hopes for the country to exert leadership in the Indian Ocean.⁵ Following this lead from PACOM, the U.S. Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard adopted the conceptualization of the region as the Indo-Asia-Pacific in their 2015 strategy document, *A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower*.⁶ Yet, a lag still existed in U.S. policy. A strategy document released by Pentagon leadership that same year was titled *Asia-Pacific Maritime Security Strategy* and referred prominently to U.S. interests in the “Asia-Pacific.”⁷

¹ Please note this is one American analyst’s point of view; the ideas expressed are solely those of the author and not of any organization with which she is affiliated.

² https://www.eastwestcenter.org/system/tdf/private/apb105_6.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=32835

³ <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2012/11/200664.htm>

⁴ <https://www.indiaamericatoday.com/article/us-commander-locklear-calls-for-indo-asia-pacific-cooperation/>

⁵ https://archive.defense.gov/news/defense_strategic_guidance.pdf

⁶ <https://news.usni.org/2015/03/13/document-u-s-cooperative-strategy-for-21st-century-seapower-2015-revision>

⁷ https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/NDAA%20A-P_Maritime_Security_Strategy-08142015-1300-FINALFORMAT.PDF

Under the Trump administration, the “Indo-Pacific” phrase entered U.S. policy documents. The White House’s *National Security Strategy*, released in December 2017, discusses the importance of this region to U.S. national interests and prioritized keeping it “free and open.”⁸ The “Indo-Pacific” is also referenced in the U.S. Defense Department’s January 2018 summary of the *National Defense Strategy*.⁹ In May 2018, PACOM was renamed Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM), further synchronizing the characterization of U.S. policy interests in this region. In November 2019, the U.S. State Department released *A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing A Shared Vision*.¹⁰ This report described in detail Washington’s efforts to work with its allies and partners toward this normative goal for the region. The Pentagon’s June 2019 *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report* similarly reiterated the U.S. vision for a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” and detailed the Defense Department’s efforts with countries in the region. Notably, the report began by emphasizing that “the Indo-Pacific is the Department of Defense’s priority theater.”¹¹

Change and continuity

The introduction of the term Indo-Pacific in U.S. policy has included some notable changes and continuities. First, the reference to continental “Asia” has been dropped. Certainly, U.S. interests will continue on land, but the adoption of this primarily maritime conception of this region and its importance is striking in a national strategy document. Second, it suggests that the U.S. maritime services will assume an increasing role in U.S. defense policy, whereas U.S. ground and air forces have arguably wielded more influence among U.S. policymakers and defense planners historically. The name change of the long-standing PACOM—a joint military command—is also striking.

Yet, despite this broader focus on the maritime domain, including now the Indian Ocean, U.S. priorities under the “Indo-Pacific” concept remain mostly the same. To begin with, even though PACOM was renamed INDOPACOM, the geographic responsibilities for this command have not changed.¹² The command’s focus aligns with the *National Security Strategy*, which defines the geographic scope of the Indo-Pacific as “stretch[ing] from the west coast of India to the western shores of the United States.” INDOPACOM’s AOR thus continues to exclude the western half of the Indian Ocean. As many U.S. policy documents state—including the 2019 Department of Defense *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report*—the United States is “a Pacific nation.” Until policy-level change realigns military planning responsibilities, the Pacific will remain the priority for the United States, despite the shift to the Indo-Pacific articulation of U.S. strategic interests.

Washington’s normative priorities are also long-standing and will continue to emphasize the right of U.S. forces to fly and sail wherever international law allows. Both the State Department and Pentagon Indo-Pacific reports discuss the importance of adhering to international law and norms, including freedom of navigation and overflight, under the Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy.

⁸ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>

⁹ <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Free-and-Open-Indo-Pacific-4Nov2019.pdf>

¹¹ <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jul/01/2002152311/-1/-1/1/DEPARTMENT-OF-DEFENSE-INDO-PACIFIC-STRATEGY-REPORT-2019.PDF>

¹² https://archive.defense.gov/news/UCP_2011_Map4.pdf

While much attention now focuses on U.S. freedom of navigation operations in the context of rising threat perceptions from China, the 2019 Department of Defense report highlights how President Ronald Reagan discussed the importance of this priority as far back as 1983: “We will not acquiesce in unilateral actions of other states designed to restrict the rights and freedoms of the international community in navigation and overflight.”¹³

This means that the United States will maintain its long-standing freedom of navigation program, including by contesting China’s claims to disputed features in the South China Sea. In fact, the United States also challenges claims by important strategic partners such as India. An examination of the Pentagon’s 2019 *Annual Freedom of Navigation Report* reveals many U.S. operational challenges of claims that the United States finds to be excessive—not only by China in the East and South China Seas but also by many Indian Ocean countries, including India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Maldives, Oman, Pakistan, and Iran in 2019.¹⁴

Future outlook

The 2017 *National Security Strategy* and 2018 summary of the *National Defense Strategy* announce the threat confronting the United States as “the reemergence of long-term strategic competition.” China and Russia are described as posing threats to neighboring countries as well as U.S. forces in the region. Of note, both documents emphasize the threat to stability in the South China Sea, and the resulting policy approach to China has become understood as a new case of great power competition in Washington circles. Various policy statements issued under the Obama administration identified threats from China, but the Trump administration has placed greater emphasis on the country’s challenge to the United States and the wider rules-based international order. Washington took the additional step in July 2020 of aligning its policy with the 2016 international arbitral tribunal ruling on the China-Philippines dispute in the South China Sea.¹⁵

In response to this threat from China, the *National Security Strategy* prominently calls for the United States to increase quadrilateral cooperation in the Indo-Pacific with India, Japan, and Australia. U.S. threat perceptions have long converged with allies Japan and Australia. In the past two years, China’s assertiveness along its land border with India has magnified threat perceptions in New Delhi and deepened India’s willingness to participate in the Quad. All four countries are now actively engaging in Quad consultations, most recently at the foreign ministerial level in October 2020 and soon at the MALABAR exercise.¹⁶ But whereas U.S. and Australian¹⁷ visions are aligned in their more limited view of the geographic scope of the “Indo-Pacific,” Japan’s and India’s views of the region encompass the entire Indian Ocean. This broader focus in India’s 2015 maritime strategy, *Ensuring Secure Seas: India’s Maritime Security Strategy*, makes sense because

¹³ <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jul/01/2002152311/-1/-1/1/DEPARTMENT-OF-DEFENSE-INDO-PACIFIC-STRATEGY-REPORT-2019.PDF>

¹⁴ <https://policy.defense.gov/Portals/11/Documents/FY19%20DoD%20FON%20Report%20FINAL.pdf?ver=2020-07-14-140514-643×tamp=1594749943344>

¹⁵ <https://www.state.gov/u-s-position-on-maritime-claims-in-the-south-china-sea/>

¹⁶ <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/10/05/what-you-need-to-know-about-the-quad-in-charts/>

¹⁷ https://www.defence.gov.au/StrategicUpdate-2020/docs/2020_Defence_Strategic_Update.pdf

the country is centrally located in that body of water.¹⁸ Meanwhile, Japan's conception of the region as a "confluence of the two seas" (Pacific and Indian Oceans) was articulated by Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe more than a decade ago during his first administration.¹⁹ Consistent with their expansive vision of the Indo-Pacific, Japan and India have discussed developing an Asia-Africa Growth Corridor extending across the Indian Ocean to provide a transparent, economically sustainable alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative.²⁰

Yet, as discussed earlier, even though U.S. interest in the Indian Ocean has been growing for the past decade, the Pacific will remain the area of primary interest to Washington. The United States has more historical legacies, military basing and access needs, and economic interests in that segment of the Indo-Pacific. If anything, the Trump administration has increased U.S. attention to the Pacific by calling out China so prominently in its national security documents. Regardless of political leadership beyond 2020, the United States is undeniably on a course of great power competition with China for the coming decade. Washington will continue to demonstrate its active interests in the security of the Indo-Pacific region through the Quad, freedom of navigation military operations, and maritime capacity-building efforts such as the Maritime Security Initiative. Moreover, the United States' emphasis on the Pacific in the Indo-Pacific concept may ultimately prove to be a positive source of continuity for Indian Ocean countries, which are wary of greater militarization and heightened competition in their region.²¹

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¹⁸ <https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/content/indian-maritime-security-strategy-2015>

¹⁹ <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/speech-2.html>

²⁰ <https://aagc.ris.org.in/about-aagc>

²¹ <https://menafn.com/1100902669/President-Gotabaya-reiterates-Lankas-plea-to-make-the-Indian-Ocean-a-Zone-of-Peace>