

What's New in the US Indo-Pacific Strategy?

The United States' strategy for the so-called Indo-Pacific remains muddled.

By Ankit Panda

For some years now, the U.S. government has found early June a useful time for its security and defense messaging in Asia. That's the time of year that the Singapore-based security forum known as the Shangri-La Dialogue convenes, bringing together governmental and nongovernmental delegates from across the region – and a few from outside the region – to reflect on a range of issues. This year, then-U.S. Acting Secretary of Defense Patrick Shanahan was dispatched to Singapore to speak on the Trump administration's Indo-Pacific strategy.

Shanahan, who has since resigned his position, yielding to a new acting secretary of defense, was upstaged by China's Defense Minister Wei Fenghe. 2019 marked the first time since 2011 that Beijing sent a top defense official to the Singapore-based forum. In recent years, the Shangri-La Dialogue had taken on a reputation of being a little too U.S. friendly for China's taste. This prompted Beijing, in part, to stand up its own competing dialogue, the Xiangshan Forum.

Those of us who came to Singapore this year for the Shangri-La Dialogue were unsurprised to learn that the two themes guiding this year's conversation were great power competition between the United States and China (and the consequences of that competition for smaller states in Asia), and the salience of the Indo-Pacific as a geostrategic concept. The United States started seriously adopting the Indo-Pacific framing in late 2017. By 2018, the Indo-Pacific had grown into the preferred American nomenclature for the region broadly corresponding to what was formerly U.S. Pacific Command's area of responsibility – ranging from the westernmost tip of India to the U.S. Pacific coast. Accordingly, Pacific Command was renamed Indo-Pacific Command.

Shanahan had one job at the Shangri-La Dialogue this year: Present the U.S. Department of Defense's new Indo-Pacific strategy. A common critique that observers of U.S. Asia policy – this writer included – had voiced was that the Trump administration, in recognizing China as a strategic competitor and taking actions to push back on what it saw as unfair Chinese trade practices, was not acting strategically. Definitions of strategy vary among scholars, but all invariably include an end-state. While the Trump administration had long discussed its preference for a “free and open Indo-Pacific” – borrowing language that had first been brainstormed and developed in Tokyo, where the Indo-Pacific has been a long-simmering intellectual framing for Asia – it did not describe what it meant.

Unfortunately, Shanahan largely failed at his one job at the Shangri-La Dialogue. He delivered a speech that was wide-ranging, comprehensive, but, at its core, unoriginal. To delegates that had been attending the dialogue for several years, much of Shanahan's speech evoked themes that had first been developed by policy officials at the Pentagon in the final years of the Obama administration, for instance. Most perplexingly, as Shanahan spoke in Singapore, the Pentagon released via the internet its new strategic document for the Indo-Pacific: the 2019 Indo-Pacific Strategy Report. The acting secretary of defense made no reference to this document in his prepared remarks, however.

The Indo-Pacific Strategy Report itself is mostly unoriginal as well. For analysts familiar with other strategic documents released by this administration – namely the December 2017 National Security Strategy or the January 2018 National Defense Strategy – there is little novelty in the new report. The document does, however, incorporate some changes that distinguish it from the Obama administration’s own “pivot” or “rebalance” to Asia. It picks up on two themes that have been particular hobby horses for Trump ever since he was on the campaign trail. The first of these is the explicit focus on China as a “revisionist power.” The second is a focus on equitable burden-sharing among allies. This is something the Obama administration had largely emphasized in a trans-Atlantic context, but less so in the Pacific.

A third area of novelty is inherent to the Indo-Pacific concept itself: The inclusion of the Indian Ocean region. The report, however, is revealing in its limited discussion of the Indian Ocean littoral region. In its statement of U.S. interests in Asia, as well as U.S. threat perceptions, the Indian Ocean is an afterthought. The basic strategic orientation of the United States remains toward East and Northeast Asia – toward Beijing and Pyongyang. North Korea receives considerable discussion as a “rogue state” and a serious threat to the U.S. homeland. Viewed from a distance, the Indo-Pacific Strategy Report makes apparent that the Indian Ocean remains a secondary area of interest for the United States. America, as it has been for decades, remains fundamentally interested in the East and Northeast Asian strategic space.

If early June was about stating U.S. interests in Asia, the rest of the month has demonstrated how difficult it remains for Washington to extricate itself from old obsessions in the Middle East. June marked the most serious escalation between the United States and Iran since Trump’s inauguration in January 2017. Between the assaults on oil tankers in mid-June, attributed to Iran by the U.S. government, and the Iranian shutdown of a U.S. surveillance drone, the prospect of a new conflagration in the Persian Gulf appeared all too likely. Trump, according to a *New York Times* report, stood down plans for military strikes on Iran at the eleventh hour late in the month. Even as Iran’s actions in the Middle East may be a constant irritant for U.S. interests in the region, the fact remains that U.S. strategic attention remains disproportionately focused on the Middle East. In short, U.S. actions in June 2019 have revealed just how hollow Shanahan’s assertions about the primacy of the Indo-Pacific in American national strategy are.

Between Shanahan’s exhortations at Shangri-La and the ensuing tensions with Iran, one is reminded of the Obama administration’s experience in 2011. That was the very year that then-Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton introduced to the Asia “pivot” to the American diplomatic lexicon in an article published in *Foreign Policy* magazine. Days after the release of that article, Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi was killed as the U.S.-led, UN Security Council-sanctioned intervention wrapped up. At the same time, the initial armed insurgency phase of the Syrian Civil War was ramping up, capturing American attention. Of course, the U.S. foreign policy apparatus didn’t come to a standstill in Asia as the Middle East became a priority, but the promise of the “pivot” didn’t materialize in the way that the rhetoric suggested it might.

A final problem for the United States in enacting an effective strategy for the Indo-Pacific is the president. This problem is more than an afterthought; it’s the central stumbling block to reassuring allies and partners, forging a positive agenda for a “free and open” region, and making commitments credible. The new Indo-Pacific strategy incorporates some of Trump’s instincts – especially on burden-sharing and China – but, by necessity, does not embrace the “America First” agenda of protectionism, unilateral militarism, and values-agnostic foreign policy.

In 2017 and 2018, then-U.S. Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis was well-received at the Shangri-La Dialogue precisely because he reminded attending delegates of the pre-Trump consensus in American foreign and defense policy toward Asia. But what Mattis represented was always a useful illusion, obscuring the true nature of U.S. foreign policy under Trump. The Indo-Pacific Strategy Report operates similarly, trading honesty about the nature of the U.S. approach to Asia today for pabulum. In doing so, it won't be taken seriously. For many Asian states – including U.S. partners and allies – the Trump era has been here long enough that they know better than to take strategic documents at face value.