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Waylaid by Contradictions: Evaluating Trump’s Indo- Pacific Strategy

If any of Donald Trump’s initiatives ought to outlast his presidency, the Indo-Pacific strategy is arguably the most deserving candidate. The recognition that the Indo-Pacific region should become the centerpiece of America’s global engagement obviously predated Trump. Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, for example, acknowledged in 2010 “how important the Indo-Pacific basin is to global trade and commerce.”¹ By 2014, then-Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel would declare—in words almost foreshadowing Trump—that “having just come from New Delhi and having consulted closely with our Japanese and Korean allies and ASEAN [Association of Southeast Asian Nations] defense ministers, I see a new, committed resolve to work together, to work together to build a security system across this Indo-Pacific region, recognizing the independent sovereignty of nations, respecting that sovereignty, but also recognizing the common interests that we all have for a stable, peaceful, secure world.”²

This desire to construct a security system across the Indo-Pacific region can in fact be traced even further back to President George W. Bush, whose dramatic efforts to transform the relationship with India were driven by the quest for a new geopolitical equilibrium in Asia.³ This endeavor, and all of Washington’s other eye-catching initiatives since, might give the impression that unifying

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the Pacific and the Indian Ocean spaces has been fundamentally an American enterprise.

In reality, the emergence of the Indo-Pacific as a strategic theater is owed fundamentally to China, whose rise as a great power—with its accompanying thirst for

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energy, markets, commodities, and influence—has pushed it beyond its traditional zones of interest in East and Southeast Asia toward the Indian Ocean, to include the greater South Asian region, the Persian Gulf and its environs, and the eastern coast of Africa and its interior. The evolving Chinese presence in these areas—economically, politically, and increasingly militarily—has unified the Pacific and Indian Ocean spaces and their hinterlands in new ways in the post-Cold War era.

Furthermore, China's arrival as a US competitor at the global level, coupled with its growing rivalries with other Asian states, such as Japan, Australia, and India, has enabled deepening security ties among both Washington and these regional partners, thus imposing on the wider Indo-Pacific basin a common strategic imperative to balance Beijing using all instruments of national power. China, therefore, is the true progenitor of the "Indo-Pacific"—the United States being merely a respondent.⁴

The Trump administration, however, deserves credit for crystallizing what its predecessors were slowly groping toward and, given the likely persistence of the Chinese challenge, future administrations should retain its Indo-Pacific construct as the foundation for US regional policy going forward. But the content of Washington's policies ought to change, because the current Indo-Pacific strategy—which must be distinguished from Trump's larger campaign against China despite important intersections—has often been handicapped by the president himself in different ways in the geopolitical, economic, and military realms.

Geopolitics—Reconfiguring Strategic Asian Tectonics

If the principal goal of US national security policy is to protect the American homeland, its people, and its allies, the key geopolitical task consists of neutralizing the threats emerging from the most important quadrants of the globe.

China's Threat to Displace the US

Although the threats today range from weapons of mass destruction to terrorism to pandemics, Trump's 2017 *National Security Strategy* recognized that hostile

powers represent unique dangers because states are especially effective at mobilizing power for coercive ends. It thus correctly singled out China as distinctively problematic because Beijing “seeks to displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region, expand the reaches of its state-driven economic model, and reorder the region in its favor.”⁵ The 2018 *National Defense Strategy* more pointedly declared that China “seeks Indo-Pacific regional hegemony in the near-term and displacement of the United States to achieve global preeminence in the future.”⁶

These aims pose grave dangers to US primacy because they are underwritten by China’s growing strength in contrast to rivals like Russia, North Korea, and Iran, which are either weak or weakening powers. China’s ascendancy and its growing influence throughout Asia in fact threaten a longstanding pillar of US grand strategy, namely, preventing the rise of any hostile power capable of dominating the Eurasian landmass.⁷ Since the pathbreaking analyses of geostrategists Halford Mackinder and Nicholas Spykman, American policymakers have well understood that ambitious European or Asian powers could utilize local resources not only to secure continental hegemony but also to constrict US access to the areas in which they enjoyed predominant influence and, in time, project power across the oceans to threaten US interests in the Western hemisphere itself.⁸ The United States fought two world wars in the 20th century to avert just this outcome.

China today is well along the path to preeminence in Asia, bolstered this time around by sophisticated instruments of influence, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and complemented by a growing panoply of sophisticated military instruments. China’s rise, in fact, represents the perfect manifestation of the hegemon’s curse: the United States created and preserved a liberal international order—including an open trading system—to enlarge its own power and prosperity and that of its friends, but in the process it generated the very conditions that enabled rivals like China to rise and become significant threats.⁹ And having long overlooked the consequences of China’s mercantilist strategies, the United States must now confront the corresponding hegemon’s dilemma: should Washington constrain its support for the open trading system in order to protect its relative gains even at the cost of diminished overall prosperity, or should it continue to underwrite the system that promises increased absolute gains generally in the hope of finding other ways of remedying its relative losses?

Neutralizing the Threat: A Free and Open Indo-Pacific

Though previous US administrations settled for upholding the system at large while attempting to mitigate the dilemma on the margins, Trump has

energetically plumped for improving US relative gains. Consequently, he has sought to disrupt the global supply chains that now cross national boundaries and limit Sino-American economic interdependence through a strategy of “decoupling”—that is, forcing US (and international) firms currently manufacturing in China to “reshore” their operations back to the United States.

However, China’s deep economic integration with all the key commercial centers, including critical US allies in northeast and southeast Asia, Europe, and the United States itself, makes these efforts to limit Beijing’s power extraordinarily difficult. In part, this is because China remains a vital destination, at least where high-quality mass manufacturing at scale is concerned. More importantly, though, compelling businesses to leave China is especially hard for Asian nations, including US allies, because it requires them to choose between security and prosperity, a dilemma that is hard to resolve outside of war. Because both the United States and Asian powers seek to avoid conflict with China for obvious reasons, the geopolitical dimension of Trump’s Indo-Pacific strategy has to be judged fundamentally on whether it has found alternative ways to limit China’s misuse of power, namely by constructing an effective countervailing coalition to balance Beijing in Asia.¹⁰

Washington undoubtedly has unilateral instruments that can be employed toward this end, and the Trump administration has not shied away from using them. Calling out China as a “strategic competitor” has itself been an advance because it has clarified the challenge after almost two decades of simmering suspicions and equivocation. But acting on this judgment, it has also imposed tariffs and economic sanctions on China (or Chinese entities), condemned Beijing’s human rights abuses (especially in Xinjiang), increased US military operations in waters and airspaces illegally claimed by China (particularly in the South China Sea), and rhetorically attacked the Chinese Communist Party and its political influence operations (in various international forums and through US public diplomacy).

The intellectual anchor of a “free and open Indo-Pacific” is a Japanese idea

The administration’s principal multilateral effort, however, has centered on its call for a “free and open Indo-Pacific.” This Japanese idea, which the Trump administration appropriated in its early months in office, became the intellectual anchor for mobiliz-

ing regional support to balance China. Consequently, its three political themes were intended to highlight problematic Chinese behaviors while championing Asian resistance in response in each of these realms:

- respect for the sovereignty and independence of all nations irrespective of their size and power,
- the peaceful resolution of disputes,
- and the importance of adhering to international law especially regarding freedoms of navigation and overflight.¹¹

At a geopolitical level, this approach reflects ideas earlier championed by Nicholas Spykman, who viewed protecting the Rimland—the maritime fringes of the Eurasian landmass—and its offshore islands as the best way of containing a hostile hegemon either in Europe or in Asia. Since China is itself a Rimland state, and since China’s Central Asian and Russian hinterlands are hard to peel away from its influence given its current advantages in reach and resources, the Trump administration’s approach consisted of enticing other Rimland powers threatened by China (such as India and Vietnam) as well as the other offshore Indo-Pacific nations (such as Japan, Taiwan, and the maritime states of Southeast Asia) and farther outlying entities (such as Australia and the small island states of Oceania) to join with the United States. Because these entities represent important concentrations of power along the Asian landmass, prioritizing them is strategically rational for any maritime strategy aimed at balancing China.

Constraints on a Free and Open Indo-Pacific

In this context, it is unfortunate that Washington did not invest as much as it should have in the transatlantic partnership, because the European allies lie at the northwestern terminus of China’s geopolitical ambitions epitomized by its BRI. This neglect has serious consequences. Success in the Indo-Pacific requires strong solidarity at *both* ends of the Eurasian axis, with the European littoral remaining vital because its states number among America’s strongest allies and ardently advocate for the liberal order, it contains the markets and advanced technology coveted by Beijing, and some of its residents possess both overseas territories in Asia and the military power capable of operating there.¹²

In any event, the administration’s efforts to persuade its Asian partners to condemn China’s assertive behaviors bilaterally or in multilateral fora, penalize it by constraining diplomatic and economic engagement, and confront it where necessary through military instruments have been an arduous undertaking because virtually all these nations—including those most affected by Beijing’s aggressiveness—are strongly intertwined with China economically and are each weaker than China. Since Beijing has also intimidated these states individually, while exploiting their differences with their other neighbors, and has often used coercive tactics that did not clearly cross the threshold of war, China managed to preempt serious collective pushback, producing instead an uneasy regional acquiescence to even its most overbearing actions.

These structural constraints are likely to endure; hence, the Trump administration's Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy has not been able to generate unified Asian resistance toward China. Even if this strategy, or its successor variants, were to be executed perfectly, orchestrating regional balancing of China would prove to be difficult, especially if Beijing satisfies critical economic needs along its periphery and beyond. Although more transparent Chinese aggressiveness could make this task easier, its commercial partners would be loath to confront its strategic ambitions unless they are directly attacked by

The US will have to settle for a variety of overlapping, interest-based coalitions

China—as, for example, India has now belatedly begun to do. Consequently, the United States will have to settle for a variety of overlapping, interest-based coalitions: a small number of core partners for military security, a larger set focused on protecting supply chains, and perhaps the biggest coalition focused on promoting the rules-based order.

Because India is important to these issues, it served as the initial centerpiece of the admin-

istration's Indo-Pacific policy. This was partly a logical consequence of integrating the Indian Ocean into traditional US interests in the Asia-Pacific, but it was also driven by the belief that India's size, location, capacities, and rivalries with China made it a natural partner—along with Japan in northeast Asia—in any balancing effort vis-à-vis Beijing. India's continuing political hesitations and its strategic weaknesses, however, hobble this effort, though it remains one of promise.¹³ The Sino-Indian border crisis in Ladakh has undoubtedly reinforced New Delhi's inclination to deepen its security partnership with Washington, but an open or deep embrace of the United States to conjointly balance China still remains to be consummated.

Over time, the administration, responding to Southeast Asian dismay over the loss of "ASEAN centrality" amid the attention to India, reaffirmed ASEAN's importance in its Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy as well. Given Beijing's threat to the South China Sea, Washington doubled down on engagement with ASEAN, intensified its support to the Mekong states in continental Southeast Asia, eliminated previous US ambiguity by formally rejecting both China's excessive maritime claims as well as its "Nine-Dashed Line," and encouraged Japan to expand joint bilateral development activities in regions ranging from Southeast Asia to eastern Africa. But none of these endeavors, while clearly necessary, can disguise Southeast Asia's strategic weaknesses, its internal divisions, its susceptibility to intimidation by China, and its perpetual desire to hedge between Washington and Beijing.¹⁴

Strategic Successes and Endorsement

Other US actions have proven more promising. In a remarkable effort, the United States invested renewed attention to Oceania to prevent the growth of Chinese influence and eventually Chinese facilities in the region.¹⁵ The US relationship with Taiwan has also transformed quietly but significantly. Despite the constraints posed by Chinese reactions, the Trump administration bolstered US-Taiwan ties by regularizing visits by senior officials, authorizing the sales of advanced military equipment, supporting Taipei's membership in international organizations, and intensifying cooperative defense planning in the context of the growing Chinese threat.¹⁶

If imitation is the highest form of flattery, the US Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy has now spawned similar articulations by key regional states or organizations. In addition to Japan's original concept, India's old Act East policy has now been explicitly incorporated into an Indo-Pacific framework.¹⁷ Despite its earlier misgivings, ASEAN too enunciated its "Outlook on the Indo-Pacific" in 2019.¹⁸ Australia has previously endorsed the concept in its 2017 *Foreign Policy White Paper* and most recently reiterated it in the 2020 *Defense Strategic Update*, framing its strategies clearly in Indo-Pacific terms and seeking greater coordination with partners such as Japan, India, and the United States.¹⁹ Even the Republic of Korea, despite continuing discomfort with the Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy that reflects perennial concerns about both alienating China and working with Japan, has sought ways to accommodate this concept in its own New Southern Policy, just as Taiwan has also done, albeit far more enthusiastically, in its New Southbound Policy.²⁰ Finally, even European partners have joined the chorus, with all the states that have either Indian Ocean or Pacific interests—such as France, the United Kingdom, Germany, and the Netherlands—articulating their own Indo-Pacific strategies or participating in political, economic, or military activities in the region.²¹

These endorsements of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific undoubtedly vary in substance—and even geographic demarcation—but criticisms that highlight these discrepancies risk missing the larger gains: first, the widespread recognition of the intersection of the Indian Ocean and the Asia-Pacific security complexes; second, the steady development of integrated strategies—despite the difficulties—coupled with internal bureaucratic realignments in most states to better respond to China's growing presence in this theater; and finally, the gradual realization of US ambitions to create an intermeshing network of partnerships. This network includes new institutions such as the Quadrilateral Dialogue; new intensified bilateral affiliations such as that between Japan and India, Australia and Japan, and Taiwan and India; and new demonstrations of support by the wider international community, especially Washington's European partners.

Admittedly, even such densifying networks can only deliver so much in the face of rising Chinese power. But that is a limitation of all diplomacy, not proof of its irrelevance. Containing Chinese power in the worst circumstances will always depend on American military potency and the combat capabilities of key Asian states—as well as their willingness to use these resources cooperatively when conditions demand. Here, rising Chinese aggressiveness has only aided Washington’s Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy. The steady shift in India’s attitudes toward partnership with the United States and its quiet but increasing naval collaboration are a good example, as is the growing willingness of key Asian powers such as Japan, India, Australia, Taiwan, Singapore, and Vietnam to cooperate among themselves outside of an American aegis. Altogether, these outcomes confirm that threats will always be far more important in catalyzing balancing behavior than any exhortations to collective action—even if diplomacy is indispensable for creating a hospitable environment for such thresholds to be crossed decisively.

Trump’s Subversion of Critical Alliances

On this count, Trump himself has been his administration’s worst enemy. His conspicuous disinterest in promoting his own national security strategy has raised doubts about his commitment to balancing China beyond the obsession with correct-

The US cannot be successful unless it bolsters its Asian and European partners concurrently

ing trade deficits, and his fawning embrace of Xi Jinping prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2020 election season undermined his administration’s efforts to highlight the Chinese Communist Party’s singular interest in power maximization at home and abroad as *the* source of instability in Asia.²² But the problems extend beyond Trump’s personality to his worldview. At the end of the day, China cannot be successfully balanced in Asia and beyond unless the

United States takes the lead in doing so and, as part of that effort, strengthens its alliances by bolstering its Asian and its European partners concurrently. Trump’s prevailing approach, however, consists of confronting China and US allies simultaneously, thus fundamentally subverting the core objective of constraining Chinese power.

Trump’s congenital reluctance to uphold US leadership in protecting the world order that Washington itself created has proven more dangerous to its effort at balancing China. Even if all the Asian allies collectively pooled their economic resources, their combined capabilities are still inferior to China. When military power is compared, the chasm is even more significant. The contributions of the United States are thus vital to bridging the gap, not just materially, but even more consequentially in leadership. After all, sustaining alliances

involves collective action. In the absence of an organizer willing to bear the costs associated with orchestrating the appropriate response, coordinated resistance to China will likely remain elusive.

Trump's caricatural nationalism, however, has undermined this objective because he views the liberal international order and America's alliances as an expensive burden that the United States unfairly bears for its friends rather than as a common good that disproportionately benefits the preservation of American primacy in the international system.²³ The failure to appreciate that, however asymmetrical it may be in Asia, collective defense preserves both American security and prosperity has led Trump into extortionary negotiations over burden-sharing with many close allies such as South Korea and Japan. Washington's NATO allies have been similarly targeted. The exhortation for larger allied defense investments is justified—and US entreaties on this count predate Trump—but they become *more* difficult to realize when accompanied by strident attacks on alliances, public deprecation of their value to the United States, and declarations that US military commitments produce benefits only for others. As one European scholar summarized the problem, “it is hard for U.S. partners to reconcile Washington's call to join its Indo-Pacific vision with the constant way Trump's policies question the U.S. commitment to these partners.”²⁴

That US alliances have survived despite this bruising is a testament partly to the remedial efforts mounted by Trump's administration, especially the Departments of State and Defense as well as the combatant commands, but even this palliation has not extinguished doubts about the US willingness to go beyond narrow self-interests. Although the *National Security Strategy* plainly declares that the United States “must lead and engage in the multinational arrangements that shape many of the rules that affect U.S. interests and values,”²⁵ Trump's transparent disdain for multilateral institutions—which all US allies depend upon because of their relative weakness—has only exacerbated these anxieties.

At a time when active involvement in international institutions would have earned the United States disproportionately greater returns in alliance support, it is unfortunate that Trump's attitude has diminished the effectiveness of his administration's Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy. This outcome is more dismaying because the United States continues, in its practice, to uphold its alliance obligations and most of its multilateral commitments routinely, yet it fails to receive due credit because of the president's strident antipathy to these institutions.

Economics—Protecting the Sinews of Material Power

If the geopolitical goal of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy entails building international coalitions to shape Chinese ascendancy in Asia, its economic

counterpart should be directed at protecting America's material power and that of its allies. Competing with a rising China requires these nations to hold their own in economic strength, for without this indispensable foundation, few other ambitions can be realized. This objective has taken the Trump administration in four different directions: stimulating US economic growth, preventing continued Chinese exploitation of the international trade system, reconfiguring trade networks in the Indo-Pacific, and opposing the BRI as a vehicle for increased Chinese influence.

Stimulating US Economic Growth

The Trump administration focused on stimulating US economic growth right from the beginning. It sustained the economic expansion that had begun under Barack Obama, already the longest in postwar US history, through the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act, which reduced tax rates for businesses and individuals; increased the standard deduction and family tax credits; reduced the scope of estate taxes; limited mortgage interest deductions; and cancelled the penalties associated with the Affordable Care Act's individual mandate. The quasi-multiplier effects of these primarily tax measures helped preserve the high growth rates that the United States enjoyed until the COVID-19 pandemic struck the country in early 2020.²⁶

For all the gains in expanding economic growth, however, their impact on long-term US prospects is unclear. The Trump tax cuts raised the budget deficit significantly without stimulating investments, and the efforts to roll back Obama's health-care initiatives are myopic given the importance of reforming US healthcare for long-run economic growth. Perhaps the most striking blow to the US ability to compete with China over time, however, has come less from the administration's fiscal policies than its anti-immigration crusade, which undermines American competitiveness and, if uncorrected, will exacerbate the labor force shortfalls that will become increasingly apparent in the coming decade.²⁷ Furthermore, the larger challenges associated with improving the US national innovation system—the real fountainhead of power in competitive international politics—have still not been addressed. Here, the Trump administration has focused mainly on the regulatory environment while neglecting innovation policy entirely. Its initiatives, aimed at improving the business climate, have arguably undermined other competing objectives such as protecting the environment, while in some cases actually deepening inefficiencies in the US economy by protecting sunset industries such as coal.²⁸

Preventing Continued Chinese Trade Exploitation

While these domestic policies impact US economic performance relative to China, other administration initiatives have focused on constraining Beijing's

rise more directly. Long before he entered office, Trump was absolutely convinced that international trade hurt the United States. The asymmetrically open economic order that Washington had deliberately created in the postwar period to aid the growth of its war-torn allies was a grievance for Trump, who perceived the system as enabling other nations to take undue advantage at American expense. The principal evidence confirming his views on this issue was the US trade deficit—the shortfall with China, being the largest internationally, made Beijing the special focus of his ire.

Trump, accordingly, set out to punish China through a variety of measures that included tightening China's access to militarily relevant high-technology goods, penalizing Chinese technology firms for intellectual property theft and other infractions by denying them access to US components, more closely scrutinizing Chinese investments in the United States and its efforts to tap US capital markets, preventing China from acquiring critical nodes in the defense supply chain internationally, constraining China's capacity to dominate in new disruptive technologies, and even limiting the flow of Chinese nationals to advanced technology research and development centers and, more controversially, universities in the United States.

Many of these responses, despite needing further refinement, are defensible and in fact long overdue, but they have been overshadowed by Trump's more problematic tariff wars. Since 2017, Trump has sharply increased tariffs on Chinese imports from their preexisting initial average of 2.6 percent to an intended 24.4 percent (but these have temporarily settled at around 16 percent because of the temporary Phase I agreement) in an effort to reduce the US trade deficit with China.²⁹ Although this remediation has not materialized and the US trade deficit is now larger than ever, the use of tariffs to correct China's trade surpluses is quixotic because they are a function of larger macro-economic factors that cannot be easily altered. As a result, Trump's tariffs only ended up increasing the prices of traded commodities, producing significant US job losses, and compressing US economic growth, but not correcting the trade imbalance in any lasting way.³⁰

Trump's preoccupation with tariffs also misconstrued the real challenge posed by China: its ostensibly market economy, controlled by the Communist party-state, is used not for the efficient allocation of resources but for the mercantilist end of maximizing national power. From this architectonic root grow all the other obstacles that the tariff-centered trade war has failed to address: the presence of China's state-owned enterprises in the international trading system, China's theft of intellectual property as well as its coercive technology transfer policies, the

Trump's preoccupation with tariffs also misconstrued the real challenge posed by China

significant constraints on US access to the Chinese market, and China's now intensifying policy of "civil-military fusion,"³¹ which seeks to acquire advanced technologies to expand national economic power while simultaneously developing puissant weaponry.

Although the US Trade Representative's office attempted to leverage Trump's tariffs to force structural changes in the Chinese economy—actually concluding an expansive agreement by early 2019—this effort proved abortive when Trump, in the face of Chinese pushback, settled for commitments by Beijing to buy more US goods rather than correct its fundamental pathologies.³² These modest gains might have been tolerable were it not for the fact that Trump's trade war has not been limited to rivals such as China. Rather, it has also been directed at key US allies—such as Canada, Mexico, and various European states—and at other partners vitally necessary for the success of the US Indo-Pacific strategy—namely, Japan, South Korea, India, and Vietnam.

While each of these states has pursued different strategies to mitigate the impact of Trump's warfare, including by pandering to him personally, the administration essentially sacrificed the larger gains that would have accrued to Washington if it had assembled a coalition to confront China's economic malpractices collectively.³³ Not only would such a strategy have been justified in economic terms—because the US trade deficit with China dwarfs all others—but it would also have made sense politically because US allies and friends are also affected by China's mercantilist policies, among other things. The greatest threat to the Indo-Pacific strategy's objective of enhancing US economic power and that of its allies *vis-à-vis* China, therefore, emerges from Trump's singular focus on increasing the benefits from trade for the United States alone rather than improving the gains for all its allies and friends.

Reconfiguring Regional Trade Networks

Unfortunately, this self-regarding policy, driven by a quest for "free, fair, and reciprocal trade,"³⁴ was embedded in a larger hostility to the international trading system. Trump's concerted attacks on global supply chains, which are anchored in the integrated production system centered on China and its Asian peripheries, have unnerved many Indo-Pacific allies because of the threats posed to their prosperity. Most US partners seek to diversify away from China, but they cannot decouple from China entirely without suffering major losses in national welfare. Consequently, China remains a global powerhouse despite losing its manufacturing export share to other countries such as Vietnam, Mexico, and Europe during the last six years.³⁵

Trump's antipathy to international trade has been mirrored by his dislike of its key institutions, especially the World Trade Organization (WTO), which he has

argued was set up “to benefit everybody but us.”³⁶ Because Trump could not withdraw from this institution without Congressional acquiescence, he attempted to undermine it both indirectly through his tariff wars and more directly by blocking appointments to its appellate body. A more productive approach might have focused on attempting to reform the WTO to update global trading rules, especially because the evidence suggests that, whenever the United States has initiated complaints “as it has in 114 of 522 WTO disputes over 22 years—more than any other WTO member—it has prevailed on 91 percent of [the] adjudicated issues.”³⁷

If ever the accusation that “America no longer gets Asia”³⁸ was justified, Trump’s attitude to international trade confirmed it. Although the United States, with its huge internal market, can afford a smaller trade-to-GDP ratio than many of its allies, these European and Asian partners need a well-functioning global trading system for their survival and prosperity. Although the Asian states recognize that Beijing has exploited international trading rules repeatedly, they desired a targeted and cooperative US strategy to correct this misuse. What they got instead was an unremitting attack on trade itself, the very mechanism that propelled their growth in the postwar era and embodied their hopes for accumulating the national power necessary to contend with China’s rise—something equally essential for the success of Washington’s Indo-Pacific strategy.

European and Asian partners need a well-functioning global trading system

Further complicating matters, the one solution that the United States had itself previously championed—creating uniquely high-quality partial free-trade agreements to secure higher relative gains for itself and its allies³⁹—was finally abandoned by Trump upon his arrival in office. The US withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) decisively undermined the aim of correcting “the biggest structural trade shock”⁴⁰ in US history caused by China’s entry into the global trading system. It left the other signatories to preserve the agreement (in the TPP-11 or CPTPP) in the hope that Washington might one day change its mind given the pact’s benefits.⁴¹ The Trump administration, for its part, attempted to compensate for its aversion to multilateral trading agreements by negotiating bilateral alternatives such as with Japan, South Korea, and China. None of these replacements has been satisfactory, and even the US-Mexico-Canada (USMCA) Trade Agreement, which superseded the old North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), remains just a modest upgrade over its predecessor.⁴² More importantly, though, Trump’s renegotiated bilateral trade deals merely tinker around the margins of the larger question of how trade should be best utilized to drive US and allied economic growth, absorbing enormous political attention, time, and capital on securing mostly peripheral improvements.

Where the Indo-Pacific strategy is concerned, however, the threat posed by Trump's scant regard for international trade—the critical instrument valued by US allies and partners for their prosperity—has been far more dangerous, because it undermines their ability to cope with rising Chinese power. The focus on disrupting global supply chains through forced reshoring also damages US competitiveness, which is essential for preserving American primacy over the long term. More thoughtful and targeted measures, like “nearshoring” investments toward US allies or engaging in selective decoupling either to protect critical aspects of the defense supply chain or to prevent China's dominance in critical emerging technologies, are justifiable despite their impact on economic efficiency.⁴³ But Trump's rhetoric and his focus on bringing international manufacturing back home to America *en masse* appears poised to fail, while the Indo-Pacific region drifts toward “fragmentation, shifting coalitions, and a discombobulated patchwork of rules, norms, and standards”⁴⁴ when success here requires alternative integration frameworks that limit China's centrality.

Opposing the BRI as a Vehicle for Influence

More modest successes in the economic realm have marked the Indo-Pacific strategy's efforts at developing correctives to China's BRI in Asia. This gigantic project seeks to build a vast overland “Belt” of highways, railways, and energy pipelines connecting China through Central Asia all the way to Europe in the west and southward to South Asia and continental Southeast Asia. It is complemented by a Maritime Silk “Road,” which entails new investments in ports and the associated inland infrastructure to increase Chinese connectivity in the maritime realm with Southeast Asia and through the Indian Ocean all the way to

If completed, the BRI would enable Beijing to reorder the international system to its advantage

East Africa and beyond to the Mediterranean and southern Europe.⁴⁵ Both the “Belt” and the “Road” also include a digital component that seeks to create seamless telecommunications, data, and financial networks along with the technical and institutional standards for managing them.

If completed, this initiative would make China the axial state in a vast, integrated economic system that unifies Asia, Africa, and Europe—the entirety of Mackinder's “World-Island”—thus bringing not only

immense geopolitical and commercial benefits in trail but also enabling Beijing to reorder the international system to its advantage.⁴⁶ Despite the economic gains promised by this endeavor, the resulting Chinese centrality has increased

anxieties throughout Asia and Europe. The Trump administration, overcoming its predecessor's ambivalence, responded by vociferously opposing the project. By highlighting the dangers of debt traps, the possible loss of autonomy for recipient states, and the corruption often accompanying Chinese financial infusions, the administration sought to blunt the BRI in Asia and globally, thus opening another front in the ongoing US-China rivalry.⁴⁷

China, however, has had many advantages in this competition. Utilizing its vast financial resources, Beijing has been able to entice several infrastructure-starved nations into accepting more than US\$1 trillion in investments that often produce opaque deals with ruling regimes.⁴⁸ Lacking comparable governmental resources, the Trump administration ran with the bipartisan 2018 Better Utilization of Investments Leading to Development (BUILD) Act. Despite the much smaller financial corpus of the US International Development Finance Corporation, the legislation sought to leverage the immense possibilities of private sector financing to offer nations alternatives to China's state-driven program. Whether this effort will prove successful remains to be seen, because many of the projects financed by Beijing are not particularly viable and thus are unlikely to attract private investment to begin with. In any event, the administration supplemented its own national approach by partnering with Japan in its Quality Infrastructure Initiative, wherein Tokyo has committed some US\$110 billion over five years as an alternative to the Chinese effort.⁴⁹

Washington launched several other initiatives as well, including the Blue Dot Network, a smart effort targeted not at funding infrastructure but at certifying its quality (and thus implicitly exposing the shortcomings of various Chinese construction projects in Asia); the Digital Connectivity and Cybersecurity Partnership, a long overdue initiative to help countries realize the benefits of the digital economy (where the United States and its partners still enjoy significant advantage); the Asia Enhancing Development and Growth through Energy (EDGE) program, aimed at improving the energy infrastructure (which is still a crying need throughout the Indo-Pacific); and the US-Support for Economic Growth in Asia (US-SEGA) technical assistance program, which focuses on aiding states to develop high-standard trade and investment policies and negotiate better agreements.⁵⁰

While these efforts are useful, they cannot compare with the BRI in size and are therefore often dismissed as marginal. This criticism overlooks the reality that *all* US government-led or -funded programs in Asia are only supplements, not substitutes, for US private investments. The cumulative stock of US foreign direct investment in the Indo-Pacific stood at some US\$1.6 trillion in 2018, which as Vice President Mike Pence emphasized is “more than China’s, Japan’s, and South Korea’s combined.”⁵¹ Even in the face of China’s presence, the United States remains the largest single source of foreign direct investment

in the Indo-Pacific. Therefore, the imperative of preserving the open trading system, to include protecting opportunities for private foreign direct investment, is critical for Washington's economic fortunes and its strategic primacy.

An excessive focus on relative investments, however, detracts from the struggle for political influence that Beijing seeks through its BRI. If the Trump administration, therefore, was able to spotlight existing Chinese malpractices while burnishing Washington's reputation as a responsible guardian of the international trading system, the "selective competition"⁵² with China would have been better served and the benefits of the large American private investments in the Indo-Pacific region magnified. Unfortunately, Trump's attacks on trade obscured the remarkable, albeit silent, American presence and strengthened the impression of US economic disengagement while alienating allies who enjoyed trade surpluses with the United States largely because of their comparative advantage. The failure to recognize that the gains accruing to its friends are not always dangerous for American economic or strategic interests—because the former are susceptible to resolution by negotiation while the latter remain beyond harm—thus led the Trump administration into a global trade war that targeted both friends and adversaries alike and cost the United States the opportunity to fortify the geopolitical and economic coalitions necessary to balance China as required by its Indo-Pacific strategy.

Military—Sharpening the Sword against New Threats

While strengthening the US economy, the international economic system, and commercial linkages with US allies remains fundamental to the success of the Indo-Pacific strategy, maintaining effective US military capabilities is just as vital, because fruitful interdependence cannot be sustained in their absence.⁵³ The economic integration that has occurred in the Asia-Pacific over the last several decades is owed substantially to US hegemony: superior American military capabilities enabled the rise of regional (and global) production networks by assuring the security of both the commons and local allies who thrived because they did not have to make unpalatable choices between guns and butter, despite regional dangers and potentially unequal distributions in relative gains from trade.⁵⁴

Ensuring Effective Defense of Regional Allies

In this context, the aim of the US Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy in the military realm is to ensure the effective defense of America's regional allies and friends; the protection of the sea, air, space and cyber space commons; and the security of US military facilities and its larger interests along the Asian

Rimland. Realizing these objectives requires the United States to preserve favorable local military balances that incorporate allied capabilities and the combat power generated by forward-deployed and -operating US forces. Because all American partners in the Indo-Pacific are militarily weaker than China, US reinforcements become critical to ensuring stable deterrence and, if required, a successful defense. The effectiveness with which the United States can project power from its continental and island bases to the Asian littoral is thus pivotal to regional stability.

The United States has two disadvantages in this regard. First, it has to overcome the natural friction imposed by distance and time, which makes it more difficult for a far-off power to quickly inject and sustain military forces into Asia compared to China, which operates along its peripheries with greater ease. Second, the United States has to overcome the compounding challenges of strategic friction, which arise from the military investments that China has deliberately made for over two decades now to prevent the United States from being able to easily come to the aid of its allies. These efforts to operationally disconnect Washington from its Asian partners are intended to isolate the latter from their enduring source of protection, thus leaving them vulnerable to superior Chinese military power that can be employed when necessary to defeat or coerce them as conditions require.⁵⁵ Toward this end, China has modernized its military capabilities in unprecedented ways with the intention of being able to quickly overwhelm its local adversaries; hold at risk US conventional forces based in the continental United States through a combination of cyber, space, and, over time, even kinetic attacks; thwart US reinforcements from reaching the Asian Rimland and its outlying territories (“anti-access”); and prevent the US forces that do survive the transit from successfully operating within the theater (“area denial”).⁵⁶

The US has to overcome both natural (by geography) and strategic (by China) friction

Because these anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities are now formidable, the US policy community has discussed ways to prevent the United States and China from coming into physical conflict while also arguing about the best operational responses to neutralize the Chinese military threat if war cannot be avoided. The former debate has generated a range of ideas from accepting compromises to stimulate “cooperation spirals”⁵⁷ with China to sacrificing Taiwan in exchange for a peaceful resolution of other maritime disputes and an acceptance by Beijing of the US security system in East Asia.⁵⁸ The latter debate, meanwhile, has produced ideas ranging from “offshore control”⁵⁹ by joint and combined operations to more negotiated variants that call for “a

largely symmetrical, defense-oriented, and mutual denial-centered military force structure and doctrine”⁶⁰ on the part of both China and the United States.

The Trump administration’s Indo-Pacific strategy in the military realm has disregarded all suggestions that would imply diminishing America’s operational predominance and has opted instead to double down on defeating China’s efforts to undermine US power projection and, by implication, isolate the United States from its Asian allies. The Obama administration was already moving in this direction with its intended “rebalance to Asia” and its “third offset” strategy.⁶¹ Trump’s Indo-Pacific variant has carried these efforts to their logical conclusion by tasking the US military to do whatever is necessary at the level of force structure, doctrine, and operations to secure battlespace control east of the first island chain, while vigorously contesting all Chinese military activities to its west. The strategy thus seeks to recover the traditional freedom that the United States enjoyed in power projection, thereby sustaining its longstanding ambition to defeat threats at distance from the homeland while protecting its allies in proximity to China, as required by its treaty obligations, and safeguarding the wider commons, as dictated by its strategic interests.⁶²

The decisive benefit of this decision within the US government has been strategic clarity: the US Department of Defense and the US armed forces are now guided by unambiguous goals that shape every aspect of their operations. The initiatives involved defy easy summary, but they are unified by several mutually reinforcing considerations: planning to recapitalize the US military after almost two decades of grinding low-intensity conflicts in marginal areas of South and Southwest Asia; preparing to confront the sophisticated military capabilities developed by US competitors such as China and Russia in parts of the world vital to the United States; and ensuring that Washington can exploit the growing convergence in information technology, artificial intelligence, and unmanned systems to preserve its military lead well into this century.⁶³

Building a Dominant Force

Building a force capable of dominating the battlefields of the future remains the ambition of current US conventional military modernization. This effort, and the complementary investments in nuclear deterrence, space control, cyber dominance, and electronic warfare, summarized in the US Department of Defense’s Indo-Pacific Strategy Report, are clearly oriented toward revitalizing the capacity for effective power projection even in the face of determined opposition along the Asian rimland (and in other parts of the world).⁶⁴

All the US armed services are now refocusing in support of this aim. The US Army is experimenting with “multi-domain operations” through which the joint force can achieve competitive advantage by presenting an adversary with diverse

complementary threats that each require a response, thereby increasing its vulnerabilities. The US Navy similarly aims to exploit undersea and joint air components to sufficiently degrade an opponent's capabilities prior to committing its diverse but knitted surface combatants—the epitome of “distributed lethality”—to the fight. The US Marine Corps, in a more dramatic shift, has all but given up on conducting massive over-the-horizon amphibious operations in contested areas in favor of “expeditionary advanced base operations,” which means operating from small distributed bases to attack the enemy from close-in with a variety of unmanned weapons supported by advanced targeting capabilities. The US Air Force, meanwhile, attempting to reduce the vulnerability of its main forward bases, is developing the concept of “agile combat employment,” which envisages operating small groups of advanced fighters from dispersed locations with frequent rotations and supported by distributed logistics. The US Space Force, the new independent service, is pursuing everything from innovation to redundancy—to include developing smaller space platforms supported by near-space alternatives and utilizing privately owned space systems—to ensure that all war-fighting elements have reliable access to space in peacetime and war. And even the US Coast Guard has entered this era of great power competition by focusing on constabulary missions in new operating areas, such as the Arctic, while continuing to reinvest in backstopping the US Navy in open ocean naval operations when required.⁶⁵

Only time will tell whether these endeavors will bear fruit in the face of traditional obstacles such as the services' reluctance to part with their pet platforms, the discomfort with organizational changes that may be necessitated by new technologies, and the preference for parochial solutions even when different service alternatives (or joint responses) might be more optimal. That the search for innovations is occurring, however, in a highly motivated and competent military force offers hope for success. Consequently, although static comparisons of US and Chinese military capability correctly highlight Beijing's growing strength, rising Chinese power does not automatically translate into a ready ability to defeat the United States, which still enjoys significant technological advantages and, more importantly, is miles ahead in experience with complex, multidimensional military operations.⁶⁶

The US will have to do more to vitalize US military guarantees in Asia in the years ahead

Vitalizing Military Guarantees

In any event, the administration will have to do more to vitalize US military guarantees in Asia in the years ahead. A long list of tasks can be compiled, but

the following are among the most critical. First, the Indo-Pacific theater must be adequately resourced given the immensity of the challenges and the nature of the growing Chinese threat.⁶⁷ While Trump has done the nation a favor by not beginning any new wars, his budget deficits and the COVID pandemic will stress future defense spending, and Trump, at any rate, has not made the hard decisions required to shift financial resources away from other competing theaters such as Europe and the Middle East. While Washington should economize on the latter, some resources can also be shifted away from Europe because European allies are much more capable of bridging the gap, and the principal Russian threats today consist more of gray zone coercion than major conventional war. Strengthening the transatlantic relationship—which Trump has put at risk—therefore offers better prospects for effecting an orderly transfer of resources when the risk of high-intensity wars involving China are only increasing. Several analyses have pointed out that military success in the Indo-Pacific will require more distributed basing and logistics, a larger inventory of advanced munitions, and increased forces in the theater—all of which require resources that have not yet been committed.⁶⁸

Second, the United States must hasten the expansion of programs like the attack submarine force, the unmanned surface and underwater vehicles now in development, and the new B-21 bomber fleet, which promise increased reach and operational effectiveness in Asia without compromised survivability.⁶⁹ It should also increase investments in building secure information networks for the seamless sharing of threat data and targeting information among all warfighting components and accelerate the integration of new long-range unmanned penetrating platforms, especially aboard US aircraft carriers—a much delayed innovation.⁷⁰ The opportunities now offered by battle network warfare open the door to building large and optionally manned arsenal ships resembling the Q-ships of old, an investment that would exploit the vast spaces of the Indo-Pacific and the congestion of its sea lanes to put significantly increased firepower in the hands of the combatant commanders.⁷¹ In general, the transition to stealthy, unmanned, and long-legged platforms in all the services needs to be accelerated.

Third, the United States must move in tandem with its allies to implement the idea of “archipelagic defense”⁷² throughout the Indo-Pacific theater. Controlling the battlespace east of the first island chain and projecting power unhampered across vast distances of the Pacific would be helped greatly if the geographic features that obstruct Chinese access to the Pacific and Indian Oceans could be used to bottle up its forces (just as the United States utilized the Greenland-Iceland-UK line to prevent Soviet naval components from sallying out into the Atlantic during the Cold War). Both the Marine Corps and the Army are developing concepts of operation toward this end, but the political agreements with allies and

the financial resources to emplace the networked strike systems that compel China to shift resources away from A2/AD toward self-protection must follow. In this context, the new US focus on Oceania will serve to protect a key flank astride the line of US reinforcement from Hawaii to Pacific Asia, and the expansion of the Lombum Naval Base on Manus Island will offer new opportunities for increased diversification and redundancy given the growing Chinese threat to Guam.⁷³ If this danger cannot be attenuated either through increased defenses or developing alternate bases, the current US strategy for defending its East Asian allies would be in jeopardy.⁷⁴

Fourth, the US Defense Department and US Indo-Pacific Command must give more thought to how the Indian Ocean and the Pacific theaters of operation can be better integrated. If China's presence in these hitherto disparate regions has unified them, Washington must follow suit. Although the operational problems in the Asia-Pacific are already so demanding that often few resources and little time are left over to deal with the challenges of integration, it is essential. An uncontained Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean, especially submarines, could threaten the US capacity to swing forces from the Mediterranean, Middle East, or Diego Garcia to the areas east of the Malacca Strait where they may be most needed. It may well be that the Indian Ocean region will receive more modest resources in comparison to its Asia-Pacific counterpart for some time to come, but that only makes the need for an enhanced security partnership with India—to include building Indian capacities to take on more significant operational responsibilities—all the more urgent.⁷⁵

Strengthening and Cooperating with Regional Partners' Militaries

The example of India highlights three other complementary elements that are essential for the success of the Indo-Pacific strategy in the military arena: strengthening the regional partners' capacity to mount an effective defense against China at least until US forces can come to their assistance, the growing importance of intensified US military cooperation with key regional states, and the necessity of greater intra-regional military cooperation without the United States to parry Beijing at least in conditions short of war.

Where regional partners mounting a robust enough defense against adversaries is concerned, there is reason for optimism. South Korean capabilities vis-à-vis the North, for example, are formidable in almost all arenas save nuclear weapons, and a carefully managed transition in operational control can protect these advantages.⁷⁶ Similarly, Japan and India can also hold their own against China, though they still need assistance in important warfighting areas.⁷⁷ Even Taiwan, though beleaguered and susceptible to suffering massive damage in a conflict with China, could prevent a successful invasion by continuing its

The US should reexamine how best to protect Taiwan amid its larger Indo-Pacific military aims

military reorientation toward defense by denial.⁷⁸ The United States should, at any rate, support these efforts by explicitly declaring that it would aid Taiwan in response to any Chinese attack⁷⁹—and, toward that end, should reexamine how best to protect Taiwan in the context of its larger military aims in the Indo-Pacific. Barring Singapore, the defense capabilities of the Southeast Asian states, including US treaty allies such as the Philippines, are troubling.⁸⁰ Consequently, there may be no alternative but to deploy US forces in peacetime as a tripwire in some cases, but wherever possible, encouraging (and aiding) partners to build up their own capabilities will prove to be the best investment.

Most of the key Indo-Pacific states are moving in this direction, though these efforts are still incomplete. Trump regrettably has rattled important allies such as South Korea and, to a lesser degree, Japan, though he has with equal idiosyncrasy been quite indulgent toward a non-allied partner such as India. Where unforced errors have materialized, they obviously need correction. The Trump administration itself has done much to insulate US partners from the president's own aggravations, and the strong continuing ties between the US military and its alliance counterparts (to include the growing collaboration with non-alliance partners such as India)⁸¹ represents a foundation that the next administration should build on.

This possibility will hopefully allow two looming issues to be addressed as well: incorporating new offensive capabilities by US allies vis-à-vis China and reducing the capability gaps between the United States and its partners. Traditionally, Washington was reluctant to support its allies' acquisition of offensive weapons on the presumption that the dangers of provocation and entrapment were great and ought to be avoided. Beijing's growing military capabilities should make these concerns less relevant today and, consequently, the United States should support the deployment of offensive systems by its allies and friends in order to raise the costs of Chinese aggression.⁸² If the archipelagic defense concept is to be implemented, the allies will have to operate long-range strike systems and their supporting infrastructure anyway. US policy shifts that enable their development and acquisition are thus overdue. Further, intensifying US investments in guided munitions-battle network warfare hold the promise of neutralizing emerging Chinese military threats, but they also open the door to creating new capability imbalances between the United States and its partners in coalition operations. There are no easy solutions to this challenge, but Washington will have to consider more liberal transfers of advanced military

technologies to its friends if some minimum coalition-wide military effectiveness is to be preserved when facing China.

Intensifying military cooperation with regional states to enhance US operational effectiveness in the Indo-Pacific is also an unfinished task, despite important advances. Australia has been a model ally on this count, working closely with the United States daily in peacetime while standing at its side in every conflict during the postwar period. Japan has also moved far in this regard, shifting its defense posture to aid the United States in wider regional contingencies. South Korea is unlikely to be of great military assistance in containing China for both political and operational reasons, and while Taiwan and Vietnam might desire to assist, significant cooperation from those quarters is unlikely. Singapore continues to support the United States through peacetime basing and access, but further cooperation in a conflict is uncertain.

India remains the great prize on this count. The Trump administration, continuing the policies of its predecessors, has pursued new forms of operational cooperation with India. While the Indian Navy has thus far been the spearhead of these efforts, they must now extend to the other armed services and national security bureaucracies.⁸³ If the enabling agreements signed with India permit seamless and routine military-to-military cooperation within preestablished parameters, Washington could increasingly rely on New Delhi for supporting contributions at least within the Indian Ocean region—just as it anticipates expanded cooperation with Canberra as Australia develops the force structure and capabilities to sustain a two-ocean defense posture. The operational success of the US Indo-Pacific strategy could well depend on a greater division of labor going forward.

Operational success of the US strategy could well depend on a greater division of labor going forward

Finally, Washington should actively encourage its regional partners to cooperate among themselves. Thus far, the Trump administration has invested most heavily in the Quadrilateral Dialogue, but that forum involves the United States and has no defense obligations currently.⁸⁴ Exhorting the Asian states to cooperate among themselves in different formats—without the United States, if necessary—is essential, and the United States should stand ready to support such efforts from a distance. Thus, closer cooperation among India, Japan, Australia, Singapore, Indonesia, and Vietnam in various combinations is of special value if such activities are directed toward strengthening national capacities (or operations) to resist China. Both within the Quadrilateral Dialogue and through bilateral consultations with its most capable regional allies, Washington ought to explore what kinds of intelligence, technology, and operational cooperation should be encouraged

between the various Asian states to advance the success of its larger Indo-Pacific strategy.

On balance, the Indo-Pacific strategy in its military dimension has witnessed a good beginning by the Trump administration, but most of the tasks are still incomplete. The transformations required for success at both the unilateral and the multilateral levels will necessarily take time and require strong political will, significant financial resources, and strengthened collaboration with allies and partners. On this last count, Trump himself has often misfired, but these perturbations, which thankfully have been minimized by the corrective actions of his administration, will require sustained correction going forward.

Protecting the Indo-Pacific Strategy in the Future

The record of the last four years confirms that Trump himself has been his administration's greatest impediment to successfully implementing the Indo-Pacific strategy. Its overarching objective—preserving a well-ordered region that buttresses American primacy—has been frequently waylaid by a president who cares little about that order. Despite this contradiction, the threats sought to be addressed—China's growing power and its ability to harm US and allied interests in Asia—promise to be enduring. Consequently, the Indo-Pacific strategy, however packaged, will survive Trump. The next iteration, therefore, needs to retain the best of what has been achieved thus far, while incorporating the critical correctives for its long-term success.

In the geopolitical realm, the principal change of course involves the United States recommitting to maintain its global leadership by bearing the uncovered costs necessary to protect its allies and strengthen global institutions. No balancing strategy toward China can succeed if the United States is unwilling to protect the order it has created at great costs to itself. Both allies and bystanders rely on this system to preserve their interests, and a continuing American neglect of, or assault on, its structures will produce defections that undermine Washington's ability to resist Beijing. The efforts the United States has made thus far to recruit states in Asia and Oceania to join in balancing China must be expanded to include all the European allies, whose cooperation (though necessary for success) will be restrained if Washington fails to uphold the liberal order.

In the economic arena, the major correction required is to restore US support for the global trading system. This does not imply that the United States should eschew targeting China for its economic malpractices or controlling Beijing's access to critical technologies, but these efforts should be focused, selective, and pursued in tandem with allies—without either targeting them or gutting the larger trading system in the process. Preserving the WTO as the foundation

for multilateral trade is indispensable, as are renewed efforts for reforming it. But even as these activities continue, Washington must rejoin the TPP if it is to enhance domestic prosperity, shape future Asian economic integration, and strengthen its Asian strategic partnerships to mutual advantage.

In the military sphere, the shifts required entail accelerating initiatives already launched despite service prejudices and bureaucratic obstacles. Inducting more stealthy, long-legged, and, wherever possible, unmanned systems is necessary, but developing a more resilient combat posture in the region—with the funding to support it—is imperative. Overall, concentrating on jointness and producing lethal effects through integrated capabilities, rather than investing excessively in exquisite, expensive, and relatively vulnerable platforms, promise greater returns in ensuring battlespace control and effectively projecting power against opposition. Aiding allies and partners to build their national capabilities on these counts and to cooperate among themselves in parrying China—in contrast to hectoring them and disparaging their alliances with the United States—will be essential remedies going forward.

If these changes are incorporated into future US policy, the Indo-Pacific strategy could finally achieve many of the objectives that Trump himself has stymied along the way.

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