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Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy: Competitive opinions and trends

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The emerging Indo-Pacific regional architecture is now considered to be a key factor in the fluctuations of world geopolitics and the main site of many power competitions. With its strategic, economic and commercial importance, the region has become the world's hotbed of international confrontation and conflicts in the 21st century. Following a discussion of certain nations' perspectives and responses to the free and open Indo-Pacific strategy, the article examines future cooperation tendencies in the free and open Indo-Pacific strategy, as well as evaluations of the plan's impact on the region and the globe. The paper employs qualitative analysis methods, specifically international relations research methods, historical and logical methods, as well as comparative methods by surveying secondary data and academic literature to assess the strategic calculations and responses of the US, China, and India towards the Indo-Pacific region. The article comes to the conclusion that, with more and more active participation in the Indo-Pacific regional architecture, regional countries and organizations are enhancing their position, creating a balance in international relations in the region. The shaping of the structure of the Indo-Pacific region, as well as the tendency of competition among countries promises to create a new area of power competition, along with new institutions are being formed.

Keywords: Indo-Pacific, strategy, competitive opinion, regional structure, trends.

Introduction

In the 21st century, the Indo-Pacific region has become the focal point in the global geopolitical landscape. The powerful rise of Asian economies has shifted the balance of power from West to East, from the Atlantic-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific, ushering in an era of prosperity for Asia [1]. Correspondingly, this region has become the center of power competition among major powers, in which the United States (US), China, and India play a very important role in shaping the current and future security and power structure in this region [2]. As the current number one superpower in the world, the US always wants to maintain its influence and strategic interests in this region [3]. Therefore, the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy initiated by the US aims to prevent the rise of China while strengthening its system of allies and partners [4]. Among them, Japan and Australia are two strategic allies, playing a very important role in the US's FOIP; however, these two powers are not the main focus in the power competition in this region. Meanwhile, China and India, as two major rising powers in the process of becoming global powers, will determine the main trends of competition and cooperation within the FOIP framework [5].

The reasons that can identify China and India as the two powers along with the US that will determine the trajectory of FOIP stem from the following arguments: (1) China, as the primary rival threatening the US's number one superpower position, views the Indo-Pacific region as a foothold for the country to expand its global influence [6]. Therefore, China is considered the main target of FOIP in restraining the rise of this country's power and influence in the Indo-Pacific region. Consequently, China's response and strategy in dealing with FOIP will largely determine the trend of competition within this framework; (2) India is a powerhouse with the potential to become a global power and has conflicting national interests in the border region with China. Although a peace-pursuing nation, India has geographic proximity and existential interests in the Indo-Pacific region, in which the Indian Ocean is one of the two most important regions in FOIP and falls within this country's traditional sphere of influence [7]. China's moves to expand its influence into the Indian Ocean and South Asia since the late 1990s have prompted India to need to establish an important position in the regional security structure [8], causing India to have to adjust its strategy to maintain influence and ensure security interests. However, "the economic interdependence, coupled with the desire to establish a multipolar order, has made India and China inseparable from each other" [7]. Therefore, how India balances between the US and China will greatly affect the trend of cooperation or confrontation in FOIP. Overall, the US, China and India are the three leading powers playing a decisive role in shaping the security and power structure in the Indian Ocean-Pacific region.

Therefore, in recent years, the leaders in Washington, Beijing, and New Delhi have been actively observing, considering, and adjusting their foreign policies to adapt to the unpredictable situation in the Indo-Pacific region. In the US, the administration of President Donald Trump (2017–2021) took the lead in promoting the FOIP initiative aimed at curbing China's rise in this region [9]. Under President Joe Biden's term, FOIP continues to be vigorously promoted and transitioned from "unilateral action" to "relying on allies", with QUAD being the main pillar [10]. Meanwhile, China under the leadership of Chairman Xi Jinping has responded by actively promoting diplomatic activities and economic investments within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), while

also increasing its presence in the Indian Ocean and militarization in the South China Sea [11]. As for India, the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi is considering diverse foreign policy strategies to both cooperate economically and on common global issues with China, but also restrain the increasing influence of this country in South Asia and the Indian Ocean; while also strengthening relations with countries in the region as well as with the US in order to create a strategic balance among the major powers, ensuring security and strategic interests in the region [12].

In recent years, the US-initiated FOIP initiative has attracted significant attention from international scholars. On the US side, some studies have analyzed the FOIP strategy proposed under President Donald Trump with the aim of curbing China's rise [3–5; 13; 14]. Regarding China's reaction, studies have pointed out that Beijing sees this as a US effort to prevent China's development and expansion of influence, so it has responded to the US FOIP by promoting the BRI initiative [15–18]. In addition, some studies analyze India's perspective and position on the US-initiated FOIP initiative, showing that New Delhi is still maintaining a strategic balance among the major powers [13; 19–21]. However, current research still lacks a comprehensive and in-depth view of FOIP as well as the trends of cooperation and competition within this framework. Therefore, this paper will fill this gap, providing a comprehensive view and in-depth analysis of the US-initiated FOIP, as well as the responses and perspectives of the main stakeholders such as the US, China and India, specifically as follows: First, analyzing in detail the causes and motivations that led the US to propose the FOIP strategy, including the goal of restraining China's rise and consolidating its leadership position in the Indo-Pacific region. Second, assessing China's reaction and perception of FOIP, seeing it as a US effort to prevent China's development and expansion of influence in the region. Third, analyzing India's balancing strategy in FOIP, including internal and external balancing efforts to maximize strategic autonomy with the major powers in the region. Fourth, forecasting that both competition and cooperation will go hand-in-hand within the FOIP framework in the future, due to the economic interdependence between the US and China as well as the increasingly close cooperative relationship between the US and India. Fifth, observing that the increasingly active participation of regional countries and organizations in the Indo-Pacific architecture will create a balance in international relations in the region, while competition among the major powers will continue around disputes and efforts to establish new institutions and rules. In summary, the study contributes a comprehensive view and in-depth analysis on the FOIP issue, the responses of the main stakeholders, and the future trends of both cooperation and competition, complementing the existing scholarship on this issue.

The paper employs qualitative analysis methods, specifically international relations research methods, historical and logical methods, and comparative methods by surveying secondary data and academic literature to assess the strategic calculations and responses of the US, China, and India towards the Indo-Pacific region. First, the international relations research method is applied to analyze the decisions and actions of countries through the lens of liberalism theory, which helps better understand the motives, interests, and strategic calculations behind the perspectives and reactions of the US and India towards the FOIP strategy. As for China, the paper will not use the liberal perspective to explain China's reaction to FOIP. China has long held that many international relations theories proposed by Western countries, especially liberalism, are heavily ideological, reflecting

Western views and interests, and do not fit China's historical, cultural, and political contexts. Therefore, using any Western international relations theory to analyze China's response would be inappropriate; rather, it must be based on perspectives and theories that reflect Beijing's policies, identity, and interests. Second, the historical and logical method helps explore the origins and development process of FOIP, laying the foundation for understanding the historical context that led to the emergence of this strategy. At the same time, this method also helps analyze and deduce the causal relationship between the events and actions of the countries involved, thereby identifying the driving forces and consequences that led the major powers to adjust their foreign policies in the region. Third, the comparative method is used to contrast and find similarities and differences in the perceptions and behaviors of the US, China, and India towards FOIP, in order to identify salient trends of cooperation and competition within this strategic framework. By combining the above research methods, the paper aims to gain a deeper understanding of the factors driving the shaping of FOIP and provide insights into potential trends of cooperation and competition. The main argument of the paper is that while competition between the US and China will continue to escalate, both cooperation and containment are likely to coexist; at the same time, regional powers like India will continue to pursue internal and external balancing strategies to maximize their strategic autonomy. Finally, the paper concludes that the trend of both competition and cooperation will continue to be the prevailing trend of FOIP in the future.

The US's Perspective and Reaction to the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy

Initially, the US was quite cautious about the Indo-Pacific concept, but later under President Donald Trump, the US emphasized and developed this initiative as a strategic orientation. This shift stemmed from the following main reasons. First, the rise of the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions, particularly the role of China and India, is replacing North America and Europe as the main driver of global growth. Second, the Indo-Pacific initiative is a natural result of the US's strategic adjustment to properly focus on the role of the South Asian region, especially India. Third, China's multidimensional rise, including China's changing position and increasing presence in the Indian Ocean region through the 21st century Maritime Silk Road (MSR), has further heightened Washington's concerns about Beijing's strategic ambitions [3]. Fourth, in the context of the difficult China-Japan and China-India relations, and the relative decline of the US's role in the region, Washington needs India's involvement, a new geopolitical factor to counterbalance Beijing [9]. Fifth, the new US President Donald Trump, unlike the caution of his predecessors, has more clearly expressed his support for the FOIP strategy.

The US vision and principles of FOIP under President Trump were outlined in the Department of Defense's "Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region" in June 2019 [2]. The general principles of the FOIP strategy include: (1) Respecting the sovereignty and independence of all nations; (2) Resolving disputes peacefully; (3) Free, fair, and reciprocal trade based on open investment, transparent agreements, and connectivity; and (4) Adhering to international norms, including freedom of navigation and overflight. The US emphasizes that the FOIP region is a vision in which all countries, large or small, can exercise their sovereignty without being

coerced by other countries. Countries have the right to access maritime areas, airspace, space, and international domains. Economically, FOIP emphasizes fair and reciprocal trade, an open investment environment, and transparent agreements between countries.

Although the FOIP vision states a free, open, prosperous, inclusive, and secure Indo-Pacific region that benefits all countries, many opinions (mainly from Chinese scholars) have assessed that this US strategy has different objectives. First, the FOIP strategy aims to relatively comprehensively contain China, particularly through strengthening the QUAD relationship [22]. Second, the Indo-Pacific initiative could be used to supplement the system of bilateral relations with a multilateral system to create more strategic freedom. Third, the FOIP initiative aims to establish a strategic balance between ocean and continental regions through intervening in continental relations from the sea. Fourth, the FOIP strategy helps the US access and subsequently control India. Fifth, the FOIP strategy aims to create tensions among Asian countries while facilitating the expansion of US military forces and the exploitation of US arms exports [23, p. 66].

To maintain its influence and achieve its regional goals, the US under President Donald Trump has proposed and implemented three efforts. The first effort is combat readiness. The US Department of Defense is working to enhance the Alliance's combat readiness in the most urgent contingencies through investing in training facilities and advanced missile defense systems, as well as enhancing strategic deterrence capabilities. The US is also building and developing future deployed forces in the Indo-Pacific region, balancing major forces in South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Oceania. The second effort is Partnerships. The US is strengthening and modernizing alliances with Japan, South Korea, Australia, the Philippines, and Thailand, and expanding partnerships (with Singapore, Taiwan (China), New Zealand, Mongolia), expanding partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region (with India, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Bangladesh, Nepal). The US is also solidifying the expansion of partnerships in Southeast Asia (with Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia), maintaining commitments and strengthening foundations (with Brunei, Laos, Cambodia), and consolidating commitments to Pacific Island countries, as well as outreach to other allies (UK, France, Canada). The third effort is Promoting a Networked Region. The US is strengthening trilateral partnerships (South Korea-Japan-US; Japan-Australia-US; Japan-India-US), strengthening regional institutions through multilateral commitments (with ASEAN), encouraging emerging security relationships in Asia (such as Vietnam-Australia, Japan-Vietnam, India-Vietnam, India-Japan-Australia) [2].

However, the FOIP strategy under President Donald Trump did not receive a very enthusiastic response from its allies due to his instinctive actions, personalized decisions, and "America First" mentality that frequently impacted and undermined the policies put forth by the US. Leading liberal scholar Ikenberry observed: "Today, this liberal international order is in crisis. For the first time since the 1930s, the US has elected a president who is actively hostile to liberal internationalism. Trade, alliances, international law, multilateralism, environment, torture and human rights-on all these issues, President Trump has made statements that, if acted upon, would effectively bring to an end America's role as leader of the liberal world order" [24]. President Donald Trump's absence from important meetings and constant skepticism towards alliances obscured the transparency in allied relations that previous US presidents had worked to build [10]. This goes against the fundamental rules of transparency and open, free working style of the US government. The two leading liberal scholars, Deundney and Ikenberry, argued that: "America's partners

trust it because its government and society are relatively transparent. Transparency helps assure partners that they can anticipate policy changes in a timely way and adjust accordingly. Conversely, America itself is open to influence from international partners; they know they have a voice in shaping, interpreting, and implementing rules” [25].

Therefore, “if America becomes a more closed, opaque society, its partners will fear American domination more, and liberal hegemony will not emerge or will be more tenuous” [26]. As a result, although FOIP was developed under President Donald Trump, this strategy had many shortcomings, especially in linking and coordinating with allies in the region. Scholars Yogesh Joshi and Archana Atmakuri pointed out three major limitations of FOIP under President Donald Trump: (1) President Donald Trump’s Indo-Pacific vision lacked policy implementation coordination; (2) President Donald Trump’s economic isolationism and “reciprocal” demands created serious tensions in US relations with some other countries in the region, particularly the decision to withdraw from the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP); (3) Domestic political polarization between the Democratic and Republican parties, coupled with President Donald Trump’s frequent changes in key leadership, caused international skepticism about the US’s implementation and pursuit of its strategy [27]. As such, President Donald Trump’s FOIP showed the US’s actual toughness towards China’s rise, especially when President Donald Trump initiated the US — China trade war in 2018. However, President Donald Trump’s pursuit of “America First” thinking and insistence on a “reciprocal” policy caused allies and neutral countries in the Indo-Pacific region to have grave doubts about FOIP’s commitment and effectiveness.

During President Joe Biden’s term, FOIP underwent a positive shift and was warmly welcomed by allies when President Joe Biden pursued the goal of “America’s return,” viewing the Indo-Pacific as the top priority region in foreign policy and working hard to mend and strengthen allied relations in the region, with a particular focus on enhancing cooperation with Southeast Asia, which President Donald Trump had “neglected” [28, p. 239–245]. In doing so, President Joe Biden inherited the Indo-Pacific’s nomenclature of being free and open from his predecessor Donald Trump, while adding some nuances to the vision and principles such as security, prosperity, diversity, inclusiveness, health, self-reliance, rules-based, upholding democratic values, etc., initially showing a comprehensive, balanced approach across domains [29]. In the Indo-Pacific Strategy released in 2022, President Joe Biden viewed China as the sole competitor capable of challenging the “stable and open, free world order,” but desired cooperation with Beijing in addressing non-traditional security issues such as climate change, terrorism, water security, etc. [30].

These strategic foreign policy adjustments show that while remaining vigilant about China’s ambitions to expand its power, President Joe Biden applied the values and governance methods of liberalism through US-led multilateral mechanisms and organizations to promote cooperation in addressing global challenges, reflecting the parallel trend of cooperation and competition in his foreign policy towards China. The way President Joe Biden managed relations with allies and neutral countries in the region, regulating the competitive relationship with China, truly brought “America’s return” after the image of liberalism’s “first citizen” was severely damaged under President Donald Trump, as scholar Ikenberry argued: “For 70 years, the liberal world order has rested on American power — its economic and monetary muscle, alliance system, and leadership capabilities. What we

may be witnessing is a 'transition crisis,' in which the old US-led political foundation of liberal order will give way to a new global distribution of power, new national alignments, new governing arrangements under President Donald Trump" [24].

China's Perspective and Reaction to the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy

Right from when President Donald Trump was elected to take power at the White House, Chinese intellectuals were very excited about this victory because they believed: "America will have its first American dictator leader, who has built his political brand on the ideology of isolationism and lack of understanding of the values of his own country" [31]. Chinese intellectuals openly scorned American (and European) liberalism, and President Donald Trump's highly protectionist and isolationist political statements and actions severely damaged the image of the "bastion of freedom". In fact, many Chinese intellectuals raised the question: Would a pragmatic leader like Donald Trump be able to abandon the pivot to Asia strategy, would they abandon the South China Sea issue or even their influence in Taiwan [31]? However, at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Forum in November 2017, President Donald Trump announced the FOIP, being a pioneer in deploying the strategy and directly referring to it in the 2017 US National Security Strategy. Although President Donald Trump pursued "America First", he actually pioneered shaping the FOIP to constrain China's rise in the region, which surprised and confused China. Although under President Donald Trump, FOIP was not supported by allies and neutral countries, it did lay the groundwork for President Joe Biden to inherit and readjust foreign policy back to the essence of openness, transparency and freedom that America has built over the past 70 years. The endorsement and support from allies and countries in the region has made FOIP a truly serious threat to China's rise in the region.

Given the background and structure of the FOIP plan, China believes that the US is mainly focused on two main objectives. First, to prevent China from establishing complete dominance in the Indo-Pacific region, including Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean. According to the US, this reality could lead China to gain significant advantages in maritime issues, as well as complete domination of the region's economic development process and overwhelming power over regional security and economic rules [23, p. 70]. Second, the FOIP strategy aims to maintain US leadership in the Indo-Pacific region, including controlling sea lanes and the regional economic agenda. On one hand, FOIP can counter China by supporting India and establishing the QUAD mechanism to deal with the situation where China achieves unilateral overwhelming military advantage and excludes the US from building the regional economic and security order. On the other hand, the US is drawing India into the geopolitical framework led by FOIP in order to maintain Washington's influence in building the economic and security order of South Asia in particular and the Indo-Pacific in general [11]. Therefore, China believes that the cooperation between the US, Japan, India and Australia within the QUAD framework is essentially like an "Asian NATO" version that will further complicate China's surrounding environment, as well as China's diplomatic strategy and the regional and international environment [32]. Specifically, the negative impacts of the FOIP strategy on China are mainly reflected in the following aspects.

First, China's security environment has been undermined, including disputes in the South China Sea, the Taiwan Strait issue, the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, and tensions on the Korean Peninsula. Beijing views QUAD and FOIP as an effort to restrict China's maritime expansion and undermine its interests in the Indo-Pacific region [15]. From China's perspective, the primary goal of this alignment is to constrain its growing naval capabilities and influence over strategic maritime routes and "chokepoints". Therefore, when the first QUAD Virtual Summit was successfully held on March 12, 2021 under President Joe Biden's chairmanship, China's Foreign Ministry demanded: "The relevant countries should abandon the Cold War mentality and ideological biases, not form exclusive cliques, and do things that are conducive to the unity, solidarity, peace and stability of the region" [33]. Beijing thus views QUAD as the concrete embodiment of America's FOIP to rally allies and partners to counterbalance China's rise. The combined maritime force of QUAD could potentially monitor and challenge China's activities not just in the South China Sea but across the Indian Ocean region. Their enhanced interoperability through joint exercises and security cooperation increases the prospect of coordinated frontline operations in case of contingencies (war and maritime conflicts). During his visit to the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference on March 6, 2023, when speaking about international issues, President Xi Jinping observed that: "In recent years, we have successively faced many risks, challenges, and consecutive major battles, each battle fought with the unity and perseverance of all people. In the future, the risks and challenges we face will only increase in number and become more severe" [34]. China thus understands that it may continue to face pressure and continuous opposition from QUAD, the Australia-UK-US trilateral defense pact (AUKUS) in pursuing its maritime ambitions in the Indo-Pacific. Any attempt to unilaterally change the status quo, reinforce disputed territorial claims, or project power could invite coordinated diplomatic censure or maritime intervention from QUAD and AUKUS. This aligns with President Joe Biden's stated objectives of maintaining freedom of navigation and a rules-based maritime order [30].

Second, the elements of China's great power and neighborhood diplomacy have become more complex, and strategic cooperation is more difficult. This poses a challenge for China in coordinating interests, goals, and strategies between great power diplomacy and peripheral diplomacy. America's FOIP has further complicated China's surrounding security environment. Washington's moves to reinforce alliances and partnerships threaten to undermine Beijing's position in its traditional sphere of influence. Beijing must face the twin challenge from "neighbors seeking counterweights from the US and allies like Japan, India to check China's growing clout" [35]. Meanwhile, European powers like Britain and France are seeking to increase their military presence and enhance maritime capabilities in the Indo-Pacific to pursue maritime stability and counter China [36]. This forces Beijing to carefully consider its global and regional diplomatic strategies to secure its core interests. The growing conflict of interests and strategies between China and major powers as well as neighbors makes coordinating diplomatic priorities more difficult. China must grapple with managing potential conflicts with stakeholders while still ensuring its long-term interests and strategic objectives in this region. How to navigate pressing conflicts of interest while still advancing strategic cooperation is a complex equation for China in pursuing diplomacy in this increasingly complicated region.

Third, maintaining cooperation in primary and secondary strategic directions has become more difficult, as well as the potential for mutual intervention between these two strategies. For instance, India is viewed as a secondary strategic direction posing less threat to China, but with India joining QUAD, the risks to China increase. If China pursues a strategy towards India, it could be obstructed by the US — an essential part of Beijing's primary strategy. If China attempts to stabilize China-India relations to avoid diverting excessive resources to the secondary strategic direction, this would lead to a decline in China's capabilities and greater difficulties in addressing primary strategic issues [16]. India's international assertiveness and deepening commitment to allies like the US, Japan, and Australia within QUAD has further complicated China's security backdrop. Previously, Beijing viewed India as a lesser secondary priority. However, with New Delhi projecting major regional ambitions and tightening alignments to constrain China under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Beijing is forced to recalibrate its response. If China pursues a hardline approach towards India, it risks inviting retaliation from its US ally, forcing Beijing to confront the prospect of multi-front conflicts. Conversely, if China opts to de-escalate tensions with New Delhi, it must accept reduced pressure in the South Asian and Indian Ocean regions — a top strategic priority area under its "Maritime Power Strategy", one of the key strategies driving China towards the "China Dream" [37]. Somehow, Beijing must find a way to balance these primary and secondary strategic spearheads to avoid becoming overstretched or dragged into unmanageable contradictions. This leads to challenges coordinating China's foreign policy objectives amid the region's increasingly complex and unpredictable geopolitical landscape.

Fourth, China's regional economic cooperation initiatives have been impacted. The Washington-led FOIP strategy aims to counter the potential influence of Beijing's BRI over the Indo-Pacific regional order [8]. Therefore, the FOIP initiative will pose challenges to China's implementation of BRI despite this strategy being assessed as lacking financial commitments. China views BRI as a critical centerpiece of its global diplomatic and economic strategy. Through transcontinental and maritime infrastructure projects, Beijing aims to enhance connectivity, boost trade, and expand its political and economic influence among developing nations, especially in Southeast Asia which accounts for 44 % of total FDI under the BRI framework [38]. The Indo-Pacific region is a focal area for BRI with critical shipping and energy transport routes passing through. However, America's FOIP strategy is seen as an effort to counter and limit the impact of BRI. Washington views BRI infrastructure projects and loans as a vehicle for Beijing to increase its leverage in the region. As such, FOIP focuses on promoting transparency standards, fair competition, and securing supply chain security in regional investment and trade projects. Additionally, the US is striving to rally allies and partners into initiatives like the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII), Chip 4 Alliance to provide an counterweight to BRI [39, p. 83–84]. This aims to provide alternative investment options, reducing developing countries' dependence on Chinese capital. This US effort forces Beijing to compete more vigorously to sustain BRI's attractiveness and influence amid growing challenges. Going forward, FOIP could continue exerting pressure on China's plans to expand BRI in the region, especially if it secures stronger participation from Western countries and major financial institutions.

Fifth, China is particularly concerned that the potential expansion of QUAD in the future when the US is more likely to transition its primary form from "dialogue" to

a “military alliance” would significantly impact the regional security architecture. Recent discussions have focused on the potential involvement of the UK and France, two important allies with significant interests and military presence in the Indo-Pacific region [40]. Incorporating these European powers into the QUAD framework could expand its scope and influence beyond its current Indo-Pacific emphasis towards a more global outlook. Such a development could enhance QUAD’s collective capabilities by leveraging the additional military strength and strategic resources of the UK and France to project on a global scale. At the same time, it could solidify a broader alliance committed to upholding a rules-based international order, freedom of navigation, and restraining China’s actions in the region. However, an expanded QUAD would escalate tensions with China, which the US is well aware Beijing has consistently viewed as an effort to contain China’s rise and influence in the Indo-Pacific. The integration of the UK and France into QUAD could reshape the regional security architecture, potentially shifting the balance of power and altering the existing great power competitive dynamics. While enabling stronger collective action, it also risks exacerbating existing fault lines and fueling a cycle of countervailing alliances and blocs. Hence, the significance of this potential development of the UK and France joining QUAD will depend on the scope and objectives the US envisions for FOIP.

India’s Perspective and Reaction to the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy

Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India’s foreign policy has become increasingly proactive and dynamic, aiming to “seek a larger and bolder footprint on the global stage, the transition in India signifies greater self-confidence. The overarching trend in India’s foreign policy is an aspiration to become a leading power, rather than just a balancing power. Hence, India is willing to shoulder greater global responsibilities” [41, p. 164]. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has intensified diplomatic activities, expanding India’s influence in its traditional region of the Indian Ocean and South Asia. India is particularly concerned about constraining China’s “nine-dash line” claims in the South China Sea. Upon taking office, Prime Minister Narendra Modi boldly declared: “India and the US are natural allies” [41, p. 183]. Therefore, Prime Minister Narendra Modi prioritized enhancing cooperation with the US and endorsed President Donald Trump’s FOIP, seeking to “transform India into a leading power rather than just a balancing one, in a multi-polar world order with multiple centres of influence” [41, p. 187].

Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s proactive and assertive approach has enabled India to secure a key member position in FOIP and QUAD. At the India Council on Global Affairs (ICAW) on May 19, 2023, Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio affirmed: “India is an indispensable partner to ensure a free and open Indo-Pacific region” [42]. Both the US’s FOIP and National Security Strategy under President Joe Biden identify India as a leading partner in Washington’s foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific [43]. However, India’s approach to FOIP differs significantly from the other three QUAD countries [44]. In his 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue speech in Singapore, Prime Minister Narendra Modi emphasized the importance of the Indo-Pacific as an inclusive region, stating “India does not see the Indo-Pacific Region as a strategy or as a club of limited members. Nor as a grouping that seeks to dominate. And by no means as a grouping that is directed against any country. A geographical definition, at that is impossible” [45]. This implies that the

Indo-Pacific region, from India's perspective, includes China. Even under President Joe Biden's term, while India and the US share concerns over China's increasing assertiveness with its hardline moves on the Taiwan issue, New Delhi remains cautious about binding itself too closely to Washington, and maintains relations with China despite serious border conflicts between the two countries [46].

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's comprehensive approach to the Indo-Pacific region can be explained by India's overarching strategies or its need to seek security assurances. Specifically, India has three main overarching strategic objectives: (1) The first strategic objective is domestic. Ensuring that the Indian economy continues to grow positively, thereby improving the lives of its people. To achieve this goal, India needs a large development finance to build economic-social infrastructure as well as enhance long-term state governance capabilities; (2) India's second strategic objective is to prevent its regional rivals from increasing their nuclear capabilities, specifically Pakistan and China. To achieve this, against the backdrop of a weak domestic defense industry, India has invested significantly to enhance its military capabilities through the import of military equipment from abroad; (3) The third strategic objective is to ensure peace and stability in Asia. India's drive in the Indo-Pacific region is not only security-oriented but also equally important is the economic aspect, with 95 % of New Delhi's trade volume being shipped through this maritime area [13].

In the FOIP region, India pursues a balancing strategy against regional threats based on expanding its military capabilities as well as cooperating with other countries to enhance collective capabilities. The balancing strategy also stems from the fact that India seems to lack the capacity to challenge China [19]. Specifically, to counterbalance China, India has combined multiple efforts, including cooperation with the US (particularly in security and military equipment transfer) and other countries in the region such as the QUAD (Japan and Australia) [20]. India also focuses on developing partnerships with the ASEAN region, focusing on Vietnam, Singapore and Indonesia, through bilateral and multilateral defense cooperation programs within the framework of the Act East Policy (AEP) [21]. In addition to the US, New Delhi's deeper engagement in the strategic issues of the Indo-Pacific region has also received strong support from ASEAN, Japan and Australia in an effort to balance the relationship between the two major powers in the region. In parallel with external balancing, India is also implementing internal balancing, including enhancing defense capabilities, naval capabilities, and building infrastructure along India's borders.

While acknowledging that the balancing strategy is a key factor of the broader FOIP aimed at counterbalancing China, India also seeks to implement a "reassurance strategy" with China that such balancing efforts are not aimed at Beijing or designed to contain it [19]. The "reassurance strategy" is implemented through direct statements, repeatedly stating that India is not interested in containing China, or becoming a party to an anti-China alliance. India's reassurance efforts are also reflected in bilateral and multilateral diplomacy such as BRICS cooperation (including Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa); participation in the China-initiated Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB); and to some extent, New Delhi's cautious involvement in the QUAD. This reassurance strategy reflects India's independent and balanced thinking in its foreign policy as it seeks to maintain good relations with both the US and China. Although an important economic partner, China remains a security threat with

its recent moves along the India-China border and increased military activities in the Indian Ocean. Therefore, India supports the FOIP and strengthens QUAD relations in order to implement “collective security” measures to restrain China. However, New Delhi also does not want to push its relationship with Beijing to the point of acute confrontation, so the “reassurance strategy” to alleviate China’s concerns about being surrounded is necessary. This is a wise, flexible and pragmatic foreign policy approach for India in the current context.

The above arguments show that Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s perspective on the FOIP bears the hallmarks of liberalism in an era of globalization with interdependence between economies that cannot be separated. First, India supports the FOIP view to ensure freedom and openness in the Indo-Pacific region, not dominated or controlled by any one country, and acting based on rules. Second, India does not view the FOIP as a “strategy or a club with limited membership” or “a group seeking dominance”. This view aligns with the freedom and openness of the FOIP, not wanting to form an exclusive or monopolistic alliance. Third, India emphasizes that the Indo-Pacific region includes China, excluding no country. This is in line with the open and non-discriminatory spirit of the FOIP. Fourth, although closely cooperating with the US and allies in the QUAD to counterbalance China, the QUAD still mainly maintains a dialogue format as a form of “collective security” that liberal scholars see as a way to prevent war and maintain peace [47]. Fifth, India still maintains cooperative relations with China due to the deep economic interdependence through BRICS, AIIB and to some extent not aligning too closely with the US. Overall, India’s perspective and reaction to the FOIP bears the hallmarks of liberalism through supporting a free, open, and inclusive order, not wanting to form an extremely confrontational alliance, maintaining a secure, peaceful, stable and free maritime environment in the Indo-Pacific region.

Trends of Cooperation in the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy in the Coming Time

First, the trend of both competition and cooperation between the US and China will continue.

With the FOIP, many views suggest that the US is gradually shifting its focus to South Asia and the Indian Ocean through closer security and defense cooperation with the most influential power in this region, India. As China sees the FOIP as a means used by the US and its allies to contain and encircle them, this could push Beijing to have even stronger pushbacks. As a result, political and even military tensions in the region could escalate to new levels in the near future. This has happened in the past with the Obama administration’s pivot and rebalancing strategy in Asia [41, p. 66]. However, the possibility of a large, uncontrolled conflict in the US — China relationship in the Indo-Pacific region is unlikely to occur, at least in the near future, as each country needs cooperation and fair competition with other countries. This is fully endorsed by scholar Zafar, who argued that: “So far, there has been considerable support for interpreting the power competition between the US and China in Asia-Pacific as the ‘Thucydides Trap’. However, this oversimplified assumption has limited perceptions of the Asia-Pacific region, a region emerging as a result of the liberal order and moving towards complex interdependence, even replacing the West as the center of economic development; in which small powers play an important

role in rebalancing and creating a multipolar situation in the region. Moreover, this complex world of interconnectedness forces both the US and China to find a middle ground for cooperation rather than annihilating each other" [48].

Therefore, the current trend of competition between the US and China in the region is both cooperation in sharing common interests such as non-traditional security issues; and competition in expanding and countering each other's influence in the region. China's leadership understands that the US has an overwhelming military advantage, and this will continue for several more decades. In addition, China needs markets, technology and business management practices from the US to bring the country to developed nation status and have national strength resources on par with Washington. On the US side, although there is a desire, implementing the goal of containing China in the FOIP strategy faces many challenges and limitations. Despite stated support, the policies set forth in the US FOIP strategy have been viewed as ambiguous due to the instincts and individual actions of President Donald Trump. The "America First" doctrine in trade (manifested by withdrawing from the CPTPP, the trade war with China), delays in important meetings, and skepticism towards allies (particularly on cost-sharing security issues) of President Donald Trump have diminished the clarity of the strategy and policies that Washington has pursued to implement throughout his term (2017–2021) [4]. In addition, the economies of China and the US are highly interdependent, and China is the largest partner of many Asian countries (including US allies such as Japan, South Korea and Australia), so containing and "taking down" China would be costly and difficult to achieve.

Therefore, the "America is Back" mindset under President Joe Biden has made the FOIP more clearly valuable and practical, with the success of the FOIP under President Joe Biden's term largely relying on building a network of sustainable partnerships based on trust [14, p. 12]. By doing so, President Joe Biden's commitments, strengthening alliances, and more transparent moves than his predecessor Donald Trump have helped the FOIP gain support from allies and neutral countries in the region. In addition, although President Joe Biden sees China as the sole rival in the region, he also affirms the importance of cooperating with Beijing to address global challenges. This shows the flexibility, wisdom and pragmatism in President Joe Biden's strategy to restrain China. In reality, however, almost no country today is willing to absolutely and directly support Washington and challenge China. On the other hand, with increasing weight, China is becoming an indispensable partner in addressing hot global issues. Therefore, Washington needs Beijing's cooperation in a range of global governance areas, from combating climate change, international terrorism, preventing the spread of nuclear weapons to humanitarian intervention, responding to natural disasters and disease outbreaks. With the above factors, in the upcoming FOIP strategy, there will be both competition and restraint between the US and China, in parallel with cooperation between the two powers in addressing regional and global challenges.

Second, cooperation between the US and India will continue to increase, although QUAD cooperation will remain primarily dialogue-based.

In recognizing India's role and strategic orientation, the Donald Trump administration essentially inherited the diplomatic legacy of the Barack Obama administration. President Donald Trump viewed India as a sincere partner and friend in addressing many of the world's challenges and promised to continue enhancing cooperation with India in the economic, defense and global counter-terrorism spheres, as evidenced by bilateral

defense trade deals (see Table). Into President Joe Biden's term, he continued the efforts of President Donald Trump, with US-India cooperation under the FOIP strategy continuing to develop and the QUAD officially becoming a security cooperation forum in the effort to restrain China. Through this, the US and India will continue to enhance bilateral defense and security cooperation in the direction of India increasing purchases of equipment and military technology transfers from the US, strengthening counter-terrorism cooperation between the two sides, joint exercises, cooperation in addressing regional and global issues (particularly related to Afghanistan and Pakistan) [17, p. 143].

Table. Major developments in US-India defence trade

No	Year completed	Platform/device	Quantity	Introduced	Value (billion USD)
1	2008	Super Hercules C-130J military transport planes	6	Indian Air Force	1
2	2009	P8I Poseidon Long Range Maritime Patrol and Anti-Submarine aircraft	8	Indian Navy	2.1
3	2010	AGM-84L Harpoon Block II missiles	24	Indian Air Force	0.170
4	2011	C-17 Globemaster-III transport aircraft	10	Indian Air Force	4.1
5	2011	MK-54 all-up-round lightweight torpedoes	32	Indian Navy	0.086
6	2012	Super Hercules C-130J military transport planes	6	Indian Air Force	1
7	2012	AGM-84L Harpoon Block II missiles	21	Indian Air Force	0.200
8	2015	AH-64E Apache helicopters	22	Indian Air Force	2.1
9	2015	CH-47F (I) Chinook helicopters	15	Indian Air Force	0.900
10	2016	M777 Howitzer guns	145	Indian Navy	0.732
11	2016	Super Hercules C-130J military transport planes	1	Indian Air Force	0.134
12	2016	P8I Poseidon Long Range Maritime Patrol and Anti-Submarine aircraft	4	Indian Navy	1.1
13	2019	Sig Sauer Assault Rifles	72.400	Indian Army	0.090
14	2020	AH-64E Apache helicopters	6	Indian Army	0.930
15	2020	MH-60 Romeo Seahawk helicopters	24	Indian Navy	2.1

Source: [49].

Although President Barack Obama pivoted to the Asia-Pacific region in 2012 to counter China's rise, India was quite cautious and limited its involvement in the US — China competition, with New Delhi quite skeptical about how far the interdependent economic relationship between Washington and Beijing could take their competitive relationship? Therefore, India chose not to get overly involved in the US — China competitive relationship. Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, with his proactive and strong foreign policy approach, coupled with the US commitment to the FOIP, quickly prompted India to re-engage with the QUAD, and rely on the QUAD to increase its influence and deterrence

against China. Therefore, when studying the US factor in India-China relations, scholar Li argued that:

“Before the US strategically shifted to great power competition with China, Beijing viewed New Delhi as a partner and focused on cooperating with India. When the US designated China as a major competitor, India used the US factor as leverage in its relationship with China. However, India was skeptical of the cooperative aspect of the China-US relationship and chose to hedge between China and the US. By the time of President Donald Trump, when the US identified China as a strategic competitor and introduced the FOIP, India has tilted decidedly towards the US and embraced the QUAD” [18].

This somewhat shows that the trend of US-India cooperation is mainly driven by China’s increasing influence in the region and Washington’s determination to pursue its goal of containing Beijing to some degree. On the US side, China’s growing influence is the greatest pressure on the US global strategy. Therefore, the US needs to strengthen alliances and expand partnerships to deal with Beijing’s increasing strategic competition challenge, in which India is seen as a very important partner. On the Indian side, although not publicly stated, containing China’s influence in India’s traditional South Asian sphere of influence is one of the core objectives of Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s administration. However, as analyzed, due to limited capabilities, India can hardly directly challenge China, but needs to implement a balancing strategy, first through strengthening cooperation with the US, followed by Japan, Australia, South Asian and Southeast Asian countries. The question remains open as to how far and to what extent the US and India’s commitment and cooperation in the FOIP strategy will go, because there are still differences in perceptions and FOIP strategies between the two countries; and the issue of the US’s large trade deficit with India remains unresolved.

Conclusion

The Indo-Pacific regional architecture has become an important arena for great power competition, with the US, China, and India playing a pivotal role in shaping its security dynamics and power distribution. Although the competition between the US and China is likely to continue and could intensify, this region will simultaneously witness trends of both competition and cooperation coexisting. On the competition front, the US FOIP is aimed at containing China’s growing influence and reinforcing Washington’s leadership position in the region. Consequently, this area is witnessing potential “hotspots” including escalating maritime disputes, competing institutional initiatives, and an intensifying arms race as both powers seek to enhance their military presence and alliances. However, the deep economic interdependence between the US and China could play a “buffer” role, preventing conflicts from escalating. At the same time, there will be areas for cooperation on common challenges that transcend great power rivalry. These areas include joint efforts against climate change, natural disaster management, ensuring freedom of navigation, and addressing non-traditional security threats such as pandemics, terrorism, and piracy. Multilateral forums such as the United Nations (UN), the East Asia Summit (EAS), and regional organizations like ASEAN will provide platforms for these issues.

India’s role will be pivotal in the context of a constantly evolving regional security order. While deepening its strategic partnership with the US and partners like Japan and

Australia through the QUAD to counterbalance China, New Delhi is likely to maintain a certain degree of strategic autonomy. Despite border frictions, India and China still share many common interests in their bilateral relationship, particularly in economic-trade cooperation and supporting a multipolar world order. India could leverage initiatives like the QUAD to expand its influence while avoiding overly provoking China through BRICS and AIIB. Currently, the QUAD remains primarily a dialogue forum rather than an official anti-China alliance. However, the future expansion of the QUAD with the potential participation of the UK and France could reshape the regional power dynamics, and the risk of escalating great power competition in the Indo-Pacific is likely to occur if the US decides to further expand by including these two European allies with superior military might. Regional organizations like ASEAN will need to strive to maintain a central and neutral position amid the great power rivalries. ASEAN's core principles of consensus-building, non-interference, and convening power could promote dialogue and prevent excessive polarization. However, the unity and effectiveness of this bloc could be challenged as great powers compete to influence smaller member states. Overall, the evolving security architecture of the Indo-Pacific region will be characterized by the complex interplay of competition and cooperation among major powers. While strategic mistrust and zero-sum thinking could fuel conflicts over territorial disputes and spheres of influence, there will also be pragmatic incentives for cooperation out of common interests. Organizations like ASEAN and alliance groupings like the QUAD will play an important role in navigating these intersecting currents and shaping a stable, peaceful security order for the region.

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