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Just Another Paper Tiger? Chinese Perspectives on the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy

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Key Points

- ◆ Chinese officials have responded to the U.S. “free and open Indo-Pacific” strategy through a regional counternarrative that raises doubts about the motives and sustainability of U.S. leadership in Asia while presenting China as a partner of choice.
- ◆ Chinese analysts perceive the Indo-Pacific strategy as a form of containment based on stronger U.S. relations with Japan, India, and Australia. They assess that, if left unchecked, the strategy will reduce China’s influence and increase regional tensions.
- ◆ Chinese observers identify weak regional support as the primary constraint on U.S. strategy in Asia and advocate responding by improving China’s own relations throughout the neighborhood.
- ◆ U.S. messaging needs to offer assurances of U.S. commitments and evidence of regional contributions. These messages should be regularly reinforced in regional gatherings, even those hosted by China.
- ◆ Washington needs to maintain key relationships in the region but need not respond in kind to every Chinese overture. The strategy may also create new opportunities to negotiate with China on certain issues from a position of strength.

Just Another Paper Tiger? Chinese Perspectives on the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy

By Joel Wuthnow

In March 2018, Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi responded to a question about the Donald Trump administration’s new “free and open Indo-Pacific” strategy by comparing it to “sea foam in the Pacific or Indian Ocean” that might get some attention, “but soon will dissipate.”¹ Wang’s remarks raise an important question for U.S. policymakers: Is Beijing so confident in its own influence, and doubtful of U.S. commitments in the region, that it perceives a green light to continue or expand the kinds of behavior Washington is trying to discourage, such as coercion of China’s territorial rivals and “predatory” lending?

The question takes on added significance in the context of Chinese perceptions of a United States in relative decline following the 2008 global financial crisis. The view that Washington was no longer able or willing to stand up to China may have contributed to more assertive Chinese policies over the last decade. For instance, Beijing’s discounting of some U.S. commitments under the Barack Obama administration’s “rebalance to Asia” strategy may have contributed to China’s controversial land reclamation program in the South China Sea.² Some regional observers are now concerned that Beijing will exploit Washington’s lackluster response to the 2019–20 novel coronavirus to further expand its influence across Asia.³

Nevertheless, a review of Chinese assessments of the Trump administration’s Indo-Pacific strategy over the last 3 years reveals that Beijing is not as dismissive of U.S. prospects in the region as Wang’s comments suggest. After a brief review of the origins and contents of the strategy, this paper discusses Chinese perspectives on two levels. At the official level, Beijing has already developed a counternarrative that raises doubts about U.S. motives and portrays China as more in tune with the region’s interests and sensibilities. At the unofficial level, influential Chinese civilian and military analysts have focused greatly on

the quadrilateral dialogue and U.S. relations with India, Japan, and Australia, confirming prior Chinese concerns about strategic encirclement; expressed deep concerns about the motives and ramifications of the strategy for Chinese interests; and identified regional ambivalence toward U.S. objectives as the main constraint that may be exploited to minimize risks. Their conclusion is that China should take advantage of that weakness by redoubling its own regional economic and diplomatic initiatives.

The final section of this paper argues that U.S. policymakers will have to contend with all aspects of China's response: regional countermessaging, additional investments in programs such as Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and China's changing relations with other pivotal countries, including India, Japan, and Australia. It is also possible—though far from a foregone conclusion—that Beijing's refocusing on neighborhood diplomacy as a way to prevent the emergence of an anti-China balancing coalition could imply a modest, if temporary, reduction in overt Chinese saber-rattling and predatory lending. Such moves, if they occur, would be evidence that the U.S. strategy is achieving some of its near-term objectives. Nevertheless, Washington will have to consider the implications of China's responses to U.S. influence in the region and be clear-eyed about the limits of Chinese restraint.

An Evolving U.S. Strategy in the Indo-Pacific Region

A renewal of U.S. strategic focus on Asia dates to the mid-2000s, with the George W. Bush administration's pursuit of bilateral free trade agreements, initial negotiations on a Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a shift of military assets to the region, and attempts to encourage stronger collaboration between U.S. allies (departing from the "hub-and-spokes" alliance model inherited from the Cold War). These policies were designed to strengthen the pillars of regional order, prevent China from "making a bid for hegemony,"⁴ and address other challenges, such as terrorism and North Korea's nuclear development. Driven by similar goals, the Obama ad-

ministration continued this approach, which it relabeled as the Asian "rebalance" or "pivot."⁵ Some of the unique achievements of the rebalance included signing an enhanced defense cooperation agreement with the Philippines, dispatching a U.S. Ambassador to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations for the first time, and increasing U.S. aid to Southeast Asia through the Lower Mekong Initiative.⁶

The Trump administration's approach is largely consistent with this reweighting of the region's importance for U.S. interests. At the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation CEO summit in Da Nang, Vietnam, in November 2017, President Trump identified the United States as a Pacific power and discussed the need to uphold the principles of a "free and open" regional order, such as the rule of law, individual rights, and freedom of navigation, which have supported economic growth, while also renegotiating free trade agreements to reflect the principles of "fairness and reciprocity."⁷ U.S. officials, including Trump and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, also highlighted India's role in promoting regional growth and advancing democratic norms.⁸ This contributed to the adoption of the term *Indo-Pacific* (which originated among Australian scholars earlier in the century) rather than the narrower *Asia-Pacific*, but reflected consistency in U.S. policy: both Bush and Obama courted India as a valued partner.⁹

Trump coupled his positive vision for regional order with a diagnosis of the problem that emphasized Chinese policies and actions, including intellectual property theft, massive industrial subsidies, and corporate espionage, which reduced U.S. competitiveness. His administration's National Security Strategy, released in December 2017, followed by the Department of Defense's 2018 National Defense Strategy, put more weight on strategic competition with China, in contrast with the previous two administrations that had emphasized a mix of balancing and cooperation to steer Beijing in a more positive direction.¹⁰ In various speeches throughout 2018 and 2019, U.S. officials expanded their critique of China's behavior, focusing on region-wide problems

associated with Xi's BRI, such as "debt trap diplomacy," the use of Chinese labor in building overseas infrastructure projects, and perceived exporting of authoritarian ideology.¹¹

The primary tools associated with the strategy reflect both continuity with and change from the Indo-Pacific strategy of previous administrations. Concluding free trade agreements with countries such as Japan and South Korea continued a long-term pattern, but abandoning the TPP was a major deviation. U.S. officials reaffirmed the importance of treaty alliances and partnerships with Southeast Asian countries, while placing more attention on states such as Sri Lanka, Mongolia, and the Federated States of Micronesia.¹² Trump also revived the U.S.-Japan-Australia-India quadrilateral dialogue, which was originally held in 2007, expanding its focus and upgrading it to ministerial status.¹³ In addition, his administration continued U.S. Navy-led freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea that previous administrations had used to challenge China's excessive territorial claims, but reportedly granted the military more authority to determine how, when, and where those operations would be conducted.¹⁴

Given concerns about the BRI, a hallmark of the new U.S. strategy was identifying alternative forms of infrastructure assistance. In July 2018, Secretary of State Michael Pompeo announced a \$113 million "down payment" on U.S. investments in the digital economy, energy, and infrastructure sectors.¹⁵ In October 2018, Trump signed the BUILD Act, which raised the ceiling on U.S. development financing from \$29 billion to \$60 billion. The U.S. International Development Finance Corporation was established at the end of 2019 to manage these funds, a large (but unstated) share of which would be devoted to Indo-Pacific projects.¹⁶ Moreover, in November 2018, the U.S. Government signed a memorandum with its Japanese and Australian counterparts to create a new partnership designed to provide financing for projects that "adhere to international standards and principles for development," an implicit critique of Chinese projects viewed as falling short of those standards.¹⁷

A more complete view of the Indo-Pacific strategy appeared in 2019 when both the Defense and State departments detailed their approaches to the region (see table). The Defense Department's *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report*, which was released in June to coincide with the annual Shangri-La Dialogue, illuminated how the acquisition and deployment of advanced capabilities, new operational concepts, and initiatives to strengthen security partnerships (highlighting Taiwan, New Zealand, and Mongolia) would contribute to the preservation of a "free and open" region and dissuade Chinese adventurism.¹⁸ In November, the State Department issued *A Free and Open Indo-Pacific*, which documented a wide range of diplomatic, economic, and security programs.¹⁹ In short, U.S. speeches and official documents gradually articulated an interagency strategy to strengthen the regional order and respond to challenges from China, largely continuing goals from previous administrations while adding in some unique elements.

U.S. scholars have paid close attention to the diplomatic and resource limitations that may constrain the Indo-Pacific strategy, including the Trump administration's withdrawal from the TPP, contentious cost-sharing negotiations with allies, inadequate reallocation of U.S. financial resources to the region, proposed cuts to State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development funding, and a force structure that has remained static in some ways despite a gradual shifting of air and naval assets to the region.²⁰ Nevertheless, U.S. observers have paid less attention to China's perspectives.²¹ This is a notable gap because Chinese concerns may influence responses that demand further U.S. resource commitments or reduce the strategy's effectiveness. The following discussions probe Chinese views at both the official and unofficial levels.

China's Regional Counternarrative

Since the end of 2017, Chinese Foreign Ministry and Ministry of National Defense spokespersons, along with senior Chinese officials, have addressed the Indo-Pacific strategy on several occasions.²² The tone of these

Table. Indo-Pacific Strategy Lines of Effort: State Department vs. Defense Department

State Department, <i>A Free and Open Indo-Pacific</i>		Defense Department, <i>Indo-Pacific Strategy Report</i>	
Line of Effort	Examples	Line of Effort	Examples
Engaging Partners and Regional Institutions	Pacific Pledge (\$100M), Lower Mekong Initiative (\$3.8B), Taiwan Arms Sales (\$10B), India Defense Sales (\$16B)	Preparedness	Purchases of fifth-generation aircraft, long-range anti-ship missiles, offensive cyber capabilities, new operating concepts
Enhancing Economic Prosperity	International Development Finance Corporation (\$60B), Millennium Challenge Corporation (\$2.3B), U.S.-Japan Free Trade Agreement, Blue Dot Network	Partnerships	Strengthen five treaty alliances, expand partnerships with Taiwan, New Zealand, Mongolia; emerging partnerships with South Asia/Pacific Island nations
Championing Good Governance	Transparency Initiative (\$600M), Myanmar Humanitarian Assistance (\$669M)	Promoting a Networked Region	Quad, trilateral partnerships, ASEAN engagement, support for intra-Asian partnerships
Ensuring Peace and Stability	Southeast Asia Maritime Security Initiative (\$356M), Bay of Bengal Initiative, U.S. Coast Guard Engagement, Explosives removal in Vietnam (\$340M)		
Investing in Human Capital	Fulbright Fellowships, Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative, Food for Peace Program (\$500M)		

responses has been low key, except for contentious rebuttals to direct U.S. criticisms of Chinese policies, such as those contained in the National Defense Strategy or comments by senior U.S. military officials.²³ The lack of more provocative statements in most cases suggests that Chinese officials are seeking to avoid a rhetorical confrontation with the United States that would not be well received in the region, where appetite for an escalating U.S.-China rivalry is low.²⁴ Instead, Chinese messaging has attempted to create fissures between Washington and its allies and partners by raising doubts about U.S. motives and commitments while positioning China as a partner of choice.²⁵

Four themes in Chinese messaging support this larger regional counternarrative. First are accusations of U.S. ulterior motives. In September 2018, Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng stated that China is “firmly against [U.S.] attempts to use the Indo-Pacific strategy as a tool to counter the BRI or even contain China.”²⁶ In June 2019, the Chinese ambassador to India similarly argued that the *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report’s* labeling of China as a “revisionist power . . . can hardly stop people from concluding that the real agenda of the [United States] is to contain the rise of China.”²⁷ In August 2019, a Foreign Ministry spokesman accused the United States of promoting the strategy to “drive a wedge” between China and its neigh-

bors through a “selfish beggar-thy-neighbor approach in economic affairs while making military deployments and strengthening military allies in the region.”²⁸

Second is discounting regional support for U.S. goals and policies. This is evident in Wang Yi’s March 2018 comparison of the purported attempts by the United States and its Quad partners to “contain” China to “sea foam in the Pacific or Indian oceans” that would soon dissipate because “stoking a new Cold War is out of sync with the times and inciting bloc confrontation will find no market.”²⁹ In June 2019, a Foreign Ministry spokesman responded to Acting Secretary of Defense Patrick Shanahan’s Shangri-La Dialogue speech by stating that “development and win-win cooperation is an unstoppable trend of the times and the shared aspiration of people all over the world. . . . [B]y hyping up military undertones and confrontation, a country will only end up hurting itself.”³⁰ The Defense Ministry spokesman’s response to the *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report* likewise stated that “any strategy that only satisfies the interests of one party will have little support and will hurt the interests of all in the end.”³¹

Supporting this theme, Chinese officials have construed the policies of other states as out of step with the competitive nature of the U.S. strategy. In September 2018, Le Yucheng stated that “there are various versions of [an] Indo-Pacific strategy,” and China is open to any that “will help regional development and cooperation.”³² The next month, China’s ambassador to India characterized Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s Shangri-La Dialogue speech as constituting a separate “Indo-Pacific policy” that is “not aimed at any country,” but rather “advocates open, inclusive, and rule-based cooperation, with which the Chinese side also agrees.”³³ In September 2019, Wang Yi met with the co-chair of Nepal’s Communist Party, who—likely at China’s behest—stated that Nepal “firmly disagrees with the so-called Indo-Pacific Strategy, and opposes any attempt to contain or thwart China’s development.”³⁴ This appears to have been the first attempt by China to enlist proxies to validate its own arguments against the U.S. strategy.

Third are allusions to the inability of the U.S. Government to fully resource its strategy. In August 2018, Wang Yi responded to a question about Pompeo’s announcement of a \$113 million down payment on Indo-Pacific development by stating that “when I first heard this figure of \$113 million I thought I heard wrong. At least it should be 10 times higher, for a superpower with a \$16 trillion [gross domestic product].”³⁵ A Foreign Ministry spokesman also raised implicit doubts about the strength of U.S. commitments to the region’s future by commenting, “We hope that they can make substantial financial contributions and take more concrete steps to truly contribute to the welfare of the people in the region.”³⁶

Fourth is portraying China as a magnanimous power willing to support policies that advance regional development. Commenting on the quadrilateral dialogue, a Foreign Ministry spokesman stated in November 2017 that China is “glad to see relevant countries develop friendly and cooperative relations,” as long as they do not target “a third country.”³⁷ In August 2018, Wang Yi stated, “If the [United States] wants to help regional countries with faster development and enhanced security, I think these moves should be welcomed.”³⁸ On another occasion, a Foreign Ministry spokesman likewise stated that if the United States and its partners are able to increase spending on regional infrastructure, “we welcome that with an open and inclusive attitude.”³⁹ Part of the Defense Ministry spokesman’s response to the *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report* was to note that “China upholds that all countries, while seeking their own interests, should also pursue common benefits and jointly build a community of shared future.”⁴⁰

In sum, Chinese statements on the Indo-Pacific strategy do not support an interpretation of Beijing as “nonchalant” about the direction of U.S. strategy, as one Australian-Chinese scholar argued in a *Survival* article.⁴¹ Rather, Wang Yi’s “sea foam” remarks and other official statements can be seen as part of a larger counternarrative raising questions about the motives, sustainability, and implications of the U.S. strategy, while positioning China as more in tune with the region’s sensibilities.

Communicating this message to a regional audience in different venues over 2 years constitutes an active attempt to weaken support for U.S. policy and justify China's own initiatives. This could signal a concern that, if successful, the Indo-Pacific strategy will undermine Chinese interests, in particular by strengthening the resolve of states to join with the United States to oppose China on the BRI, reject China's territorial claims, or advance other unwanted policies.

China's Strategic Discourse on U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy

At the unofficial level, Chinese scholars have assessed the Indo-Pacific strategy from many angles and have deliberated on how China should respond. The following review of 30 Chinese assessments published between 2018 and 2019 demonstrates a common narrative among influential government think tank analysts and university scholars, who focus much of their attention on the Quad countries, with some attention to U.S. partnerships with Southeast Asia and Taiwan and U.S. infrastructure assistance; assert that the main purposes of the Indo-Pacific strategy are to contain China and oppose the BRI; and identify weaknesses affecting the U.S. ability to execute the strategy, most notably lukewarm support among regional countries. This narrative leads to prescriptions that focus on enhancing China's attractiveness as a partner of choice via BRI investments and other regional outreach.⁴²

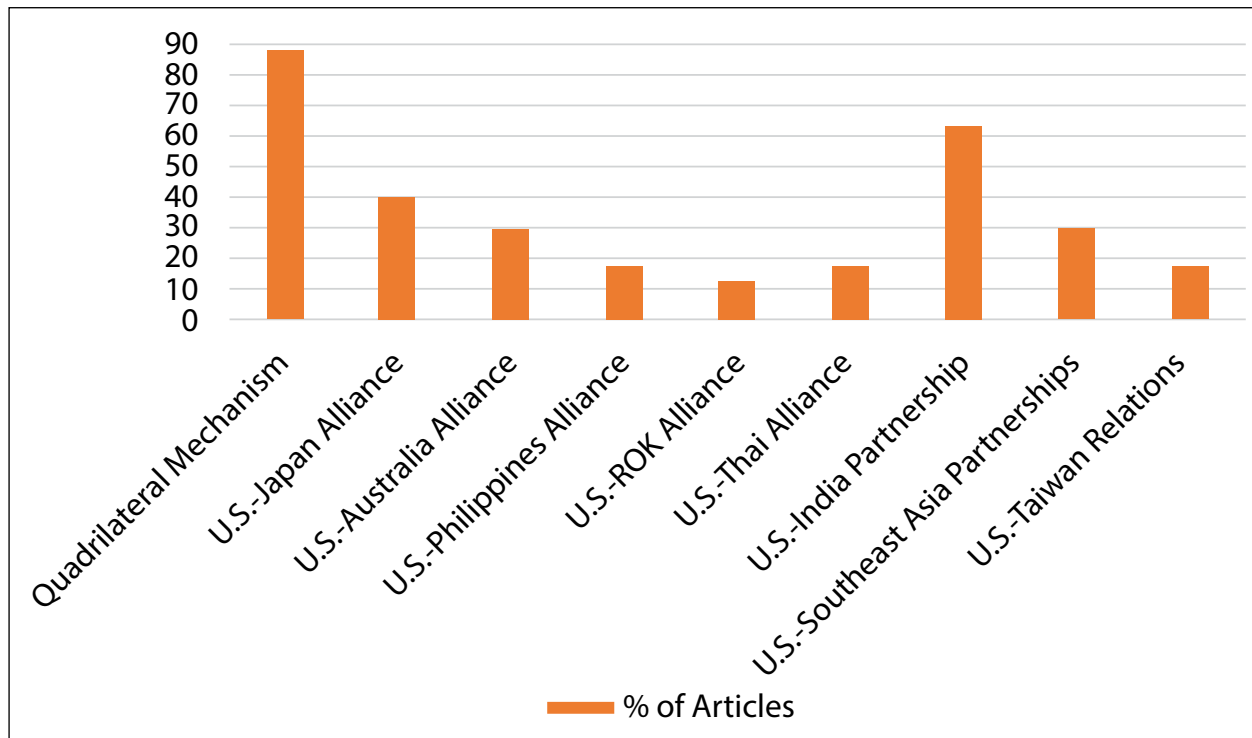
A Heavy "Quad" Focus. Compared with the broad scope of the Indo-Pacific strategy outlined in U.S. Government sources, Chinese analysts myopically focus on the quadrilateral dialogue and various tri- and bilateral interactions involving the United States, Japan, Australia, and India (see figure 1). The dialogue itself was the most common attribute associated with the strategy, appearing in 26 sources (87 percent). Ye Hailin, director of South Asian studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, describes a November 2017 quadrilateral meeting in Manila as a "significant event" in the Indo-Pacific strategy and "pre-production work" in develop-

ing strategic cooperation between those states.⁴³ Most Chinese sources contend that Washington is driving the dialogue, but a minority hold that Japan and Australia are using it to keep the United States actively involved in Asia.⁴⁴ At the trilateral level, Ye notes that coordination among U.S., Japanese, and Australian development finance institutions represents a nascent attempt to counter the BRI.⁴⁵ He also assesses the annual U.S.-Japan-India Malabar military exercise as increasingly combat-focused, with participating forces standard for "a low intensity war."⁴⁶

Chinese sources also highlight bilateral developments between the United States and its Quad partners. References to the U.S.-Japan and U.S.-Australia alliances and the U.S.-India partnership appear more frequently than references to the other three U.S. alliances (with the Republic of Korea, the Philippines, and Thailand). Of these, the greatest attention has been on U.S.-India relations, appearing in 19 sources (63 percent). Chinese analysts are especially focused on developments in military cooperation between Washington and New Delhi, including the U.S. sale to India of 22 Sky Guardian unmanned aerial vehicles in June 2017, the first to a non-ally;⁴⁷ pledges to increase defense cooperation during Modi's July 2017 U.S. visit;⁴⁸ and frequent exchanges between the two countries' defense ministers.⁴⁹ People's Liberation Army (PLA) interlocutors were also interested in the September 2018 U.S.-India Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement, which will provide New Delhi with greater access to U.S. defense items and could permit greater interoperability between U.S. and Indian forces.⁵⁰

Some analysts expand their view of the Indo-Pacific strategy to include other issues. U.S. Navy freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea are among the most commonly cited military features of the strategy, appearing in almost half of the articles.⁵¹ Scholars argue that their increasing frequency, occurrence near Chinese-occupied features, and greater authority granted to military officials under Trump reflect a bolder use of this tool.⁵² U.S. partnerships in Southeast Asia are

Figure 1. Perceived Geographic Focus of Strategy (n=30)



discussed in nine sources (30 percent). An article by two PLA scholars, for instance, argues that the weakening of the U.S.-Philippine alliance under President Rodrigo Duterte has led the Trump administration to cultivate Hanoi as a new “regional thug” (地区打手) to confront Beijing in the South China Sea.⁵³ Taiwan also appears in a few sources (5, 17 percent) that associate recent congressional legislation such as the Taiwan Travel Act and the Taiwan-related language in the 2019 National Defense Authorization Act with the strategy.⁵⁴

While Chinese assessments typically focus on the political and military features of the Indo-Pacific strategy, analysts have also paid increasing attention to its economic contours. Aspects of the strategy related to infrastructure development appear in 17 articles (57 percent), while other economic tools such as free trade agreements appear in 12 (40 percent). Some discussions, as noted, reference economic coordination within the quadrilateral dialogue or between the United States and its Quad partners. More recent assessments discuss the restructuring of the U.S. development finance bureaucracy and the allocation of \$60 billion in infrastructure financing under

the BUILD Act.⁵⁵ Interviews with Chinese civilian analysts at the end of 2018 suggested that these initiatives—more so than the \$113 million “down payment” earlier announced by Pompeo—were regarded as key parts of the U.S. strategy; one interlocutor stated this signaled that Washington was “serious in developing a whole-of-government strategy.”⁵⁶

Causes for Concern. Despite protestations of U.S. officials to the contrary, containment is the motive that Chinese strategists most frequently ascribe to the Indo-Pacific strategy.⁵⁷ Of the 26 articles that provide a view on this topic, 22 (85 percent) use some version of the argument that the United States is harnessing its military deployments and relations with countries around China’s periphery to limit China’s economic growth and military options, thereby preserving its own hegemonic status in the regional order.⁵⁸ There is often little elaboration of this perspective, suggesting that the argument is so widely accepted that none is required. Closely associated is the perception that U.S. strategy under Trump has been redesigned to constrain the BRI by circulating an “anti-BRI” message and identifying

alternative sources of infrastructure financing. This argument appears in some form in 16 articles (62 percent). By contrast, only a small group of scholars (23 percent) acknowledge that there are also significant domestic economic goals motivating U.S. strategy.⁵⁹

The quadrilateral dialogue and U.S. relations with Japan, Australia, and India figure prominently in Chinese characterizations of U.S. strategy as a containment plot.⁶⁰ Geographically, it is not lost on Chinese observers that the Quad countries occupy important positions across China's eastern, southern, and western flanks or that these countries tend to align with the United States on matters such as opposing China's expansive territorial claims, confirming prior narratives about U.S. attempts to orchestrate an Asian North Atlantic Treaty Organization. One article even suggests that the United States is building a "strategic linkage" (战略联动) between the Quad and U.S. allies in the North Atlantic region to jointly contain both China and Russia.⁶¹

Slightly deviating from the conventional wisdom, several authors argue that instead of trying to retain a dominant position in the regional order, Washington is pursuing a narrower "offshore balancing" strategy.⁶² Drawing from U.S. scholar John Mearsheimer, Zhang Jiadong, a professor at Fudan University, contends that a decline in U.S. national power relative to China and the other major powers has led the United States to shift from its postwar hegemonic strategy to an approach based on its maritime power, reminiscent of Britain's strategy in the 18th and 19th centuries.⁶³ The Quad countries are also highlighted in this perspective. Zhang writes that, confronted with China's rise, Washington cannot rely completely on its alliances with Japan and Australia to balance China, and has thus sought to pull New Delhi into its strategic orbit.⁶⁴

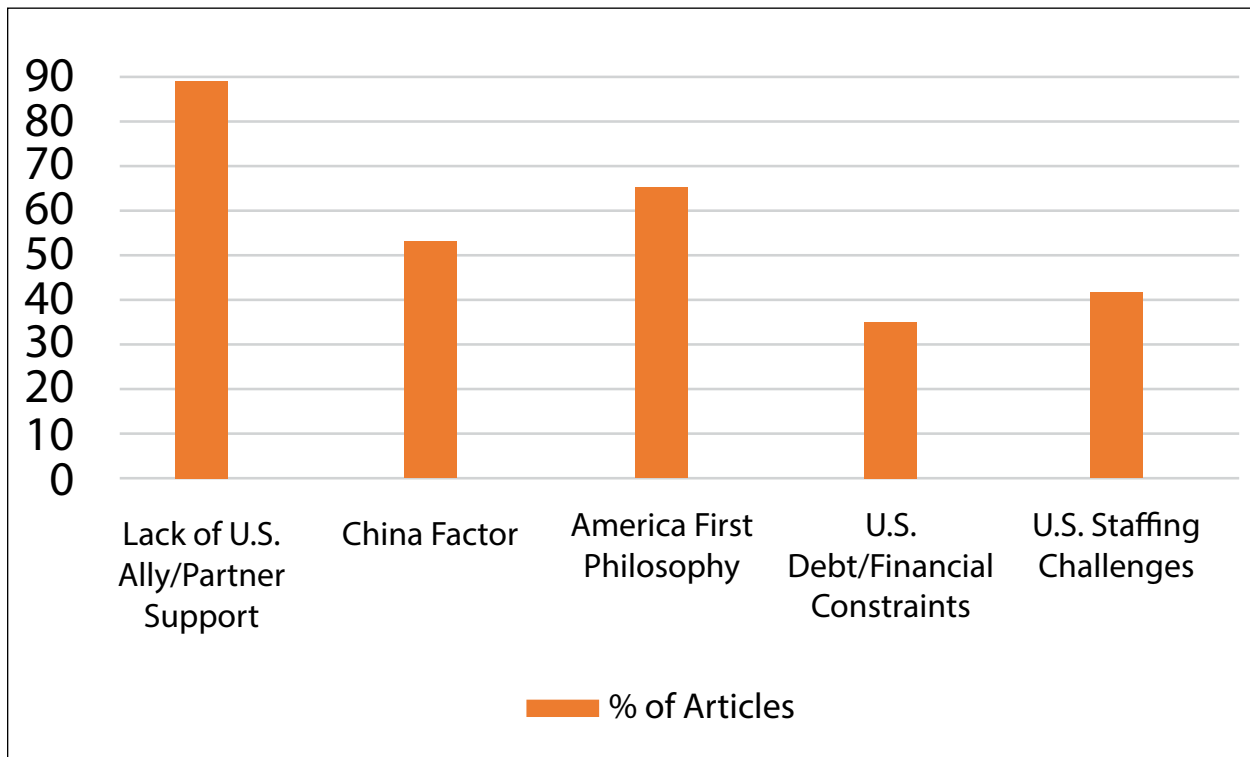
For Chinese scholars, the implication is that, if left unchecked, the strategy could damage China's interests in various ways. In a rare rebuke, two scholars from the PLA Strategic Support Force explicitly reject Wang Yi's dismissal of U.S. strategy as "sea foam," arguing that Washington's attitude is "very serious and its investment

is very obvious. . . . [O]bjectively, China's external environment has undergone important changes."⁶⁵ A majority of the 12 authors who evaluate the strategy's impact (9, 75 percent) argue that it could increase regional tensions, thus threatening China's economic development. Specific predictions include a looming arms race in the region,⁶⁶ bolder Japanese and Indian foreign policies,⁶⁷ and instability in the South China Sea.⁶⁸ Some authors (5, 42 percent) also argue that the strategy could weaken Chinese influence by reducing support for China's BRI investments.⁶⁹ One PLA scholar contends that greater interoperability between U.S. and allied forces will "weaken our influence and capabilities in the region and counter our antiaccess/area-denial capabilities."⁷⁰

Seams and Weaknesses. Concerns about these kinds of outcomes are tempered by a careful examination of a range of obstacles that could weaken the U.S. strategy (see figure 2). Fifteen of the 17 articles (88 percent) that discuss U.S. weaknesses focus on weak regional support for a hawkish U.S. strategy. Much of this analysis is focused on the three Quad partners. For example, Ye Hailin argues that Japan has a "different concept" of the Indo-Pacific at odds with Washington; Australia has no territorial disputes with China and has only a limited ability to project power near China's territory; and India has to consider its competing obligations as a new Shanghai Cooperation Organization member.⁷¹ Indeed, several scholars portray India as the weakest link in the Quad, arguing that New Delhi's aversion to alliances and policy differences with the United States on matters such as India's arms relations with Russia, energy ties to Iran, and U.S. visa restrictions would prevent India from siding with the United States.⁷²

Closely associated with this viewpoint is the argument that the Quad states are unlikely to lean too closely to the United States due to their dependence on China as a top export market.⁷³ In the Indian case, Ye Hailin argues that a key intervening variable will be Modi's domestic political strength: a stronger Modi will be more likely to look after India's long-term interests in developing economic links with China, but a weaker prime minister

Figure 2. Perceived Constraints on U.S. Strategy



would prioritize relations with Washington for domestic political gain.⁷⁴ Some Chinese scholars also cite China’s attractiveness as a reason for lukewarm support for U.S. goals from Southeast Asian states⁷⁵ and Pacific Island countries,⁷⁶ many of which are recipients of BRI financing and other Chinese assistance. A handful of scholars also note that the United States itself could be self-constrained due to the need for China’s assistance on North Korea and other issues.⁷⁷

At a domestic level, six articles (35 percent) reference financial challenges, such as Budget Control Act requirements that will limit the growth of the U.S. defense budget after 2020,⁷⁸ a U.S. national debt of more than \$21 trillion that could also constrain future U.S. military spending,⁷⁹ and U.S. global commitments that intrinsically limit the amount of spending on Indo-Pacific priorities.⁸⁰ Moreover, seven articles (41 percent) mention bureaucratic challenges such as interbureaucratic disputes, frequent policy reversals, and a lack of permanent appointees in relevant posts.⁸¹ Bridging the domestic and external constraints is the view that the Indo-Pacific strategy is fundamentally at odds with Trump’s “America

First” philosophy. Specific irritants discussed under this heading include U.S. withdrawal from the TPP, the unpopular U.S. trade war with China, the threat or imposition of tariffs, and contentious burden-sharing negotiations with states such as South Korea.⁸² As two scholars from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences suggest, the “stick of trade” and other measures have left “many allies and partners feeling at a loss.”⁸³

China’s Response: A Stronger Neighborhood Diplomacy. Depictions of lackluster regional support for U.S. policies lead Chinese scholars to consider what tools Beijing can use to exacerbate those weaknesses. Among the 16 articles that discuss responses, 15 (94 percent) contend that China should strengthen its regional diplomatic and economic outreach. Expanding BRI financing to neighboring countries is the most commonly cited tool for preserving China’s regional influence.⁸⁴ While this argument might be dismissed as simply parroting the current party line, advancing the BRI is still meaningful in the context of skepticism in some Chinese quarters about spending massive sums on foreign development, indicating that foreign policy elites might be

relatively supportive of continuing this policy if it can be framed as a tool of strategic competition. Other tools referenced in the literature include building stronger party-party relations with Vietnam,⁸⁵ building trade deficits as leverage with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations,⁸⁶ strengthening cooperation with Myanmar,⁸⁷ and supporting ASEAN's Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership.⁸⁸

Several Chinese analyses focus specifically on how Beijing can drive wedges between the United States and its Quad partners.⁸⁹ India, often seen as the weakest link, has received perhaps the most attention. Hu Shisheng, director of South Asia studies at the Chinese Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, argues that China should strengthen ties by supporting Modi's "Act East" policy and undertaking joint projects in places such as Myanmar, while recognizing India's aversion to the BRI label.⁹⁰ Ye Hailin argues instead that a solicitous approach would be interpreted in Indian circles as a form of "blackmail." His solution is for China to build relations with smaller South Asian nations such as Sri Lanka or Bangladesh in order to "force India to acknowledge the reality of China's entrance into the Indian Ocean region."⁹¹ Ye has also supported targeting Chinese investments in parts of India predisposed to welcoming them, which could help in shaping Modi's domestic calculations.⁹²

Implicit in these discussions is the perspective that Beijing should avoid actions that undermine China's regional reputation, such as a resumption of land reclamation in the South China Sea or economic penalties against states that run afoul of China on various issues (one example being China's heavy-handed response to South Korea's deployment of a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense missile battery in 2017, which led to a major decrease in China's favorability ratings among South Koreans).⁹³ Moreover, few Chinese sources, including PLA officers, argue that a military buildup or the use of military (or paramilitary) tools should be at the forefront of China's response.⁹⁴ This gap could have several explanations: hesitation to discuss coercive tools in open sources, acceptance that much higher military budgets

are unlikely due to Chinese budget constraints, or a tacit recognition that assertive Chinese policies are creating demand for U.S. military presence and assistance in the region. However, there are no signs that Chinese scholars favor a fundamental reevaluation of China's territorial or resource ambitions.

Implications for the United States

There was little evidence in this review of two of the most concerning potential misperceptions. First, there was little overconfidence or "triumphalism" about China's own capabilities that would lead to a conclusion that Beijing may simply ignore the U.S. strategy and proceed with the kinds of activities it is designed to discourage. Second, there was no alarmism that would support a dramatic response, such as a major increase in military spending, alliances with other countries, or the use of force. Rather, evidence at both the official and unofficial levels suggest that Beijing is concerned about the motives and implications of the strategy and will respond by targeting the links between Washington and its regional supporters through countermessaging, expanded economic and diplomatic outreach, and perhaps scaling back some of its more controversial policies.

It is unclear that perceptions of a failure in U.S. leadership on the coronavirus will fundamentally alter Chinese judgments about U.S. strategy in the region. Beijing has already tried to deflect blame by focusing on the theme of U.S. mismanagement of the crisis at home and abroad and highlighting China's provision of aid to many countries.⁹⁵ This fits into a larger narrative aiming to exploit divisions between the United States and its regional partners to China's benefit. However, as Michael Green and Evan Medeiros point out, predictions in the middle of crises are often perilous.⁹⁶ It is entirely possible that Chinese analysts will conclude that the crisis has actually done little to fundamentally shake U.S. advantages—or to reduce regional concerns about Chinese leadership.

One implication for U.S. policymakers concerns strategic messaging to China and the region. There is clearly a gap between Chinese and U.S. perceptions on the intent

and focus of the Indo-Pacific strategy. Chinese officials and scholars have both discussed the strategy as a way to contain China and frustrate the BRI, diverging from U.S. perceptions that the strategy is designed, in part, to dissuade China from conducting policies that undermine the regional order, but not to stunt China's growth or overturn its political system. Chinese observers are also intensely focused on the quadrilateral dialogue and relations among the Quad countries, which support the larger containment narrative, while U.S. sources portray a much wider, whole-of government strategy, with key initiatives in all of Asia's subregions.

There is probably nothing that U.S. officials can do to influence these perceptions. Chinese interpretations of U.S. strategy in Asia as a containment plot are deeply rooted and have persisted across recent U.S. strategic adjustments, including the rebalance to Asia.⁹⁷ Specific concerns about U.S. trilateral initiatives and the Quad reflect growing anxieties that Washington is trying to orchestrate an "Asian NATO" around China's borders.⁹⁸ These views continue to circulate widely among Chinese analysts, even if some are beginning to doubt whether the United States has the resources needed to execute a containment strategy.⁹⁹ U.S. assurances to Chinese interlocutors will not change those attitudes, but should continue to the extent that others in the region—few of whom support an escalating competition between the two states in which they would have to choose sides—pay attention to such messaging.

U.S. officials will also have to contend with China's regional counternarrative, which focuses on raising doubts about U.S. motives and commitments while presenting China as the more attractive partner. While avoiding over-the-top rhetoric that would alienate its supporters, Washington should continue to point out areas where Chinese policies are harming regional interests and showcase examples where the United States is actively contributing to regional development. A comparative U.S. disadvantage is that while China has subsumed much of its regional diplomacy under the BRI label, U.S. programs are carried out under many different labels, which

undermine their collective impact. U.S. officials should thus consider a common branding for U.S. initiatives in security assistance, educational initiatives, infrastructure financing, overseas development assistance, and other programs. This messaging should be reinforced by consistent, high-level U.S. participation in regional conclaves such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summits. U.S. policymakers should also find ways to advance an attractive message in China-led meetings, such as the Xiangshan Forum, or else risk losing this opportunity.¹⁰⁰

Another set of implications concerns the possibility that China will strengthen its neighborhood diplomacy to avoid a U.S.-led balancing coalition. Greater Chinese financial commitments to smaller countries in Southeast Asia, Central and South Asia, or the Pacific Islands could increase Beijing's ability to influence those states' decisionmaking on issues of concern to U.S. policymakers, such as access for U.S. firms or reliable basing for future U.S. military operations. However, U.S. decisions on whether, and in what cases, to respond to Chinese economic inducements should take into account that most states do not appear to be at serious risk of falling into a Chinese "debt trap";¹⁰¹ many are, instead, carefully hedging their bets with strong ties to the United States, Japan, South Korea, and other partners.¹⁰² Rather than seeking to respond in kind to every Chinese overture, U.S. financial assistance should focus on states that are most critical to U.S. interests and most at risk of exploitation.

Given its concerns about a nascent "Asian NATO," China will likely seek to weaken the alignment between the United States and its Quad partners. One element is high-level diplomacy, demonstrated by Xi Jinping's October 2019 visit to New Delhi and planned visit to Tokyo in 2020.¹⁰³ China might also solidify its influence in these countries by granting preferential access to BRI projects, media engagements focused on shifting popular opinion, or through influence operations targeting the elite. In this competitive environment, Washington should continue to expand robust high-level engagement with Asia's pivotal states at all levels (bilateral, trilateral, and quadrilateral) in areas such as high-tech development, infrastructure

investment, maritime domain awareness, and support for democratic institutions, and support stronger interactions among these states even if the United States is not directly involved.

While predictions of a decline in Chinese “assertiveness” remain tentative, Washington should welcome any evidence of Chinese restraint with its rivals. While Chinese analysts do not explicitly advocate such an adjustment—which would require them to admit that Beijing had been “assertive” in the first place, leading to a deterioration of China’s reputation in many countries—China could still exercise restraint in some areas in order to prevent states such as Vietnam, India, and Indonesia from seeking a closer alignment with the United States. Evidence that Beijing has shifted toward a more restrained regional posture, which might include a reluctance to conduct aggressive enforcement actions in the South China Sea or avoidance of a future Doklam-like incident with New Delhi, would be a sign that the U.S. strategy has paid dividends. Beijing should be similarly encouraged if it recalibrates BRI policies to accord with international norms, responding to widespread concerns about predatory lending.¹⁰⁴

Nevertheless, U.S. policymakers should understand the limits of China’s forbearance in regional disputes. First, Chinese leaders remain committed to the goal of defending “every inch” of Chinese territory and must not appear overly weak in front of a nationalistic domestic audience. There is no reason to suspect that Beijing would not react strongly if confronted by a perceived provocation by another territorial or resource claimant; as in the past, China would justify its responses as defensive.¹⁰⁵ Second, Chinese restraint on sensitive issues may not apply equally to all parties, and recent military and economic coercion targeted at Taiwan suggests a different approach.¹⁰⁶ Third, over the long run, Beijing’s perception that it has successfully consolidated its regional influence—and thus defused the main threat posed by the Indo-Pacific strategy—could usher in a new round of aggressive policies. This means that constant pressure is required to ensure that the shaping goals of the strategy are achieved.

Finally, there may be some implications for U.S.-China relations. While the focus of Chinese analysts has been on strengthening relations with neighboring states, some also worry about a deterioration of relations with Washington.¹⁰⁷ These authors encourage steps to maintain stability between the two dominant countries in the region, such as joint infrastructure projects,¹⁰⁸ pursuing competition in a “friendly” manner,¹⁰⁹ and strengthening military-to-military communications to avoid a direct clash.¹¹⁰ This reflects similar Chinese prescriptions during the U.S. rebalance to Asia.¹¹¹ Although Beijing will still oppose aspects of the U.S. approach that it disagrees with, such as freedom of navigation operations and U.S. arms sales to Taiwan, Beijing might be willing to reach a consensus on other issues, one example being in military crisis communications. If the United States has achieved this effect through the Indo-Pacific strategy, the time might be right to negotiate on these or other issues from a position of strength.

Notes

¹ “Foreign Minister Wang Yi Meets the Press,” People’s Republic of China (PRC) Ministry of Foreign Affairs, March 9, 2018, available at <www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1540928.shtml>.

² Ely Ratner, who served as a key Asia advisor to Vice President Joe Biden, has suggested that President Barack Obama’s “desire to avoid conflict” with China allowed Beijing to make “incremental gains” in the South China Sea. See Ely Ratner, “Course Correction: How to Stop China’s Maritime Advance,” *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2017, 64–72. Admiral Jonathan Greenert, who served as chief of naval operations during this period, reported that his counterpart, Admiral Wu Shengli, “made clear that he thought the United States would have a more forceful reaction when China began its island-building.” See Jonathan W. Greenert, *Tenets of a Regional Defense Strategy* (Washington, DC: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2018), 19n100. Thanks to Lyle Morris for this observation.

³ William Choong, “U.S. Regional Leadership: A Shot Across the Bow,” *The Interpreter*, April 7, 2020, available at <<https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/us-regional-leadership-shot-across-bow>>.

⁴ Nina Silove, “The Pivot Before the Pivot: U.S. Strategy to Preserve the Power Balance in Asia,” *International Security* 40, no. 4 (Spring 2016), 46.

⁵ Hillary Clinton, “America’s Pacific Century,” *Foreign Affairs*, October 11, 2011, available at <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/>>; Kurt Campbell, *The Pivot: The Future of American Statecraft in Asia* (New York: Twelve, 2016).

⁶ “Fact Sheet: Advancing the Rebalance to Asia and the Pacific,” The White House, November 16, 2015, available at <<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/11/16/fact-sheet-advancing-rebalance-asia-and-pacific>>.

⁷ “Remarks by President Trump at APEC CEO Summit, Da Nang, Vietnam,” The White House, November 10, 2017, available at

<www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-apecc-ceo-summit-da-nang-vietnam/>.

⁸ Ibid.; “Defining Our Relationship with India for the Next Century: An Address by U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 18, 2017, available at <www.csis.org/analysis/defining-our-relationship-india-next-century-address-us-secretary-state-rex-tillerson>.

⁹ On the broader “Indo-Pacific” concept, see Rory Medcalf, “Indo-Pacific Visions: Giving Solidarity a Chance,” *Asia Policy* 14, no. 3 (July 2019), 79–95.

¹⁰ *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: The White House, December 2017); *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military’s Competitive Edge* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, January 2018).

¹¹ See, for example, “Vice President Mike Pence’s Remarks on the Administration’s Policy Towards China,” The Hudson Institute, video, 43:09, October 4, 2018, available at <www.hudson.org/events/1610-vice-president-mike-pence-s-remarks-on-the-administration-s-policy-towards-china102018>; Phil Davidson, “Halifax International Security Forum 2018: Introduction to Indo-Pacific Security Challenges,” U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, November 17, 2018, available at <www.pacom.mil/Media/Speeches-Testimony/Article/1693325/halifax-international-security-forum-2018-introduction-to-indo-pacific-security/>; Michael R. Pompeo, “The Lessons of 1989: Freedom and Our Future,” Department of State, video, 16:27, November 8, 2019, available at <www.state.gov/secretary-michael-r-pompeo-remarks-at-koerber-stiftung-axica-the-lessons-of-1989-freedom-and-our-future/>.

¹² “Remarks by Secretary Mattis at Plenary Session of the 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue,” Department of Defense, June 2, 2018, available at <<https://dod.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/1538599/remarks-by-secretary-mattis-at-plenary-session-of-the-2018-shangri-la-dialogue/>>; “Millennium Challenge Corporation Official Visits Sri Lanka to Continue Progress on Compact,” Millennium Challenge Corporation, September 20, 2018, available at <www.mcc.gov/news-and-events/release/release-092018-mcc-official-visits-sri-lanka>; “Secretary of State Michael Pompeo Makes First Historic Visit to the FSM,” U.S. Embassy in the Federated States of Micronesia, August 27, 2019, available at <<https://fm.usembassy.gov/17874/>>; Lara Seligman, “In Rare Mongolia Stop, U.S. Defense Secretary Gets an Unusual Gift,” *Foreign Policy*, August 8, 2019, available at <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/08/08/in-rare-mongolia-stop-u-s-defense-secretary-gets-an-unusual-gift-military-pentagon-russia-china-asia/>>. Moreover, in December 2018, Donald Trump signed the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act, which contained \$1.5 billion in annual appropriations for regional security assistance programs and funded other efforts, such as democracy promotion and cyber defense initiatives. For an overview, see “The Asia Reassurance Initiative Act (ARIA) of 2018,” IF11148, Congressional Research Service, updated April 4, 2019.

¹³ Tanvi Madan, “The Rise, Fall, and Rebirth of the ‘Quad,’” *War on the Rocks*, November 16, 2017, available at <<https://warontherocks.com/2017/11/rise-fall-rebirth-quad/>>; “Secretary Pompeo’s Meeting with Quad Foreign Ministers of Australia, India, and Japan,” Department of State, September 27, 2019, available at <www.state.gov/secretary-pompeos-meeting-with-quad-foreign-ministers-of-australia-india-and-japan/>.

¹⁴ Laura Zhou, “Trump Signs Off on Plan to Allow U.S. Navy More Freedom to Patrol in South China Sea, Report Says,” *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong), July 22, 2017, available at <www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2103718/trump-signs-plan-allow-us-navy-more-freedom-patrol>.

¹⁵ Michael R. Pompeo, “America’s Indo-Pacific Economic Vision,” speech, Indo-Pacific Business Forum, U.S. Chamber of Commerce, video, 20:50, July 30, 2018, available at <www.state.gov/remarks-on-americas-indo-pacific-economic-vision/>.

¹⁶ Ben O. de Vera, “DFC Eyes Big Investments in Indo-Pacific Countries,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, January 9, 2020, available at <<https://business.inquirer.net/286798/dfc-eyes-big-investments-in-indo-pacific-countries>>.

¹⁷ “Joint Statement of the Governments of the United States of America, Australia, and Japan,” The White House, November 17, 2018, available at <www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/joint-statement-governments-united-states-america-australia-japan/>.

¹⁸ *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2019).

¹⁹ *A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision* (Washington, DC: Department of State, 2019).

²⁰ A number of these critiques have appeared in the pages of *War on the Rocks*. See, for example, Eric Sayers, “Assessing America’s Indo-Pacific Budget Shortfall,” *War on the Rocks*, November 15, 2018, available at <<https://warontherocks.com/2018/11/assessing-americas-indo-pacific-budget-shortfall/>>; Mark Montgomery and Eric Sayers, “Addressing America’s Operational Shortfall in the Pacific,” *War on the Rocks*, June 18, 2019, available at <<https://warontherocks.com/2019/06/addressing-americas-operational-shortfall-in-the-pacific/>>; Gregory B. Poling, “For Lack of a Strategy: The Free and Open Indo-Pacific,” *War on the Rocks*, November 13, 2019, available at <<https://warontherocks.com/2019/11/for-lack-of-a-strategy-the-free-and-open-indo-pacific/>>; Randy Schriver and Eric Sayers, “The Case for a Pacific Deterrence Initiative,” *War on the Rocks*, March 10, 2020, available at <<https://warontherocks.com/2020/03/the-case-for-a-pacific-deterrence-initiative/>>. For an Indian view, see Brahma Chellaney, “America’s Feeble Indo-Pacific Strategy,” *Japan Times*, November 14, 2019, available at <www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2019/11/14/commentary/world-commentary/americas-feeble-indo-pacific-strategy/>.

²¹ Two recent articles by foreign scholars do cover Chinese perceptions, but with only limited reference to the significant volume of Chinese sources available. See Feng Zhang, “China’s Curious Non-chalance Towards the Indo-Pacific,” *Survival* 61, no. 3 (May 2019), 187–212; and Feng Liu, “The Recalibration of Chinese Assertiveness: China’s Responses to the Indo-Pacific Challenge,” *International Affairs* 96, no. 1 (January 2020), 9–27.

²² This review assesses only responses that specifically characterized the “Indo-Pacific strategy” and not specific elements associated with it, such as arms sales to Taiwan. For a Japanese scholar’s assessment of Chinese public statements on the Indo-Pacific strategy, see Yamazaki Amane, “The PRC’s Cautious Stance on the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy,” *China Brief* 20, no. 4 (February 28, 2020), available at <<https://jamestown.org/program/the-prcs-cautious-stance-on-the-u-s-indo-pacific-strategy/>>.

²³ This includes China’s more assertive responses to the China-related language in the National Security Strategy, National Defense Strategy, and 2019 National Defense Authorization Act. See, respectively, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying’s Regular Press Conference on December 19, 2017,” PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, December 19, 2017, available at <www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1520766.shtml>; “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying’s Regular Press Conference on January 22, 2018,” PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, January 22, 2018, available at <www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1527756.shtml>; “Chinese Defense Ministry Opposes China-Related Contents in U.S. Defense Act,” *Xinhua*, August 14, 2018, available at <www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-08/14/c_137390012.htm>.

²⁴ See, for example, Jonathan Stromseth, “Don’t Make Us Choose: Southeast Asia in the Throes of U.S.–China Rivalry,” Brookings Institution, October 2019.

²⁵ This is consistent with one of China’s main global narratives. See Hedi Holz, *China’s Playbook for Shaping the Global Media Environment* (Arlington, VA: CNA, 2020), 7.

²⁶“Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng: Parties Should Work Together in Concert Instead of in Contest,” PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, September 26, 2018, available at <www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/t1599075.shtml>.

²⁷“Ambassador Hong Xiaoyong Has a Signed Article ‘What U.S.-China Trade War Is Really About: A Chinese Perspective’ Published in *The Straits Times*,” PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, June 7, 2019, available at <www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zwjg_665342/zwb_d_665378/t1670460.shtml>.

²⁸“Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying’s Remarks on August 5, 2019,” PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, August 5, 2018, available at <www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1686226.shtml>.

²⁹“Foreign Minister Wang Yi Meets the Press.”

³⁰“Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang’s Regular Press Conference on June 3, 2019,” PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, June 3, 2019, available at <www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1669120.shtml>.

³¹“Defense Ministry’s Regular Press Conference on June 27,” China Military Online, June 27, 2019, available at <http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2019-06/27/content_4844628.htm>.

³²“Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng.”

³³“Ambassador Luo Zhaohui Interviewed by *The Tribune*,” PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, October 2, 2018, available at <www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/cein/eng/embassy_news/t1601467.htm>.

³⁴“Wang Yi Meets with Co-Chairman of the Nepal Communist Party Puspa Kamal Dahal September 10, 2019,” PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, September 12, 2019, available at <www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1697106.shtml>.

³⁵Charissa Yong, “U.S. Announces US\$300 Million to Fund Security Cooperation in Indo-Pacific Region,” *Straits Times* (Singapore), August 4, 2018, available at <www.straitstimes.com/politics/us-pledges-nearly-us300-million-security-funding-for-south-east-asia>.

³⁶“Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang’s Regular Press Conference on July 31, 2018,” PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, July 31, 2018, available at <www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1581940.shtml>.

³⁷“Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang’s Regular Press Conference on November 13, 2017,” PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, November 14, 2017, available at <www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1510216.shtml>.

³⁸Yong, “U.S. Announces US\$300 Million to Fund Security Cooperation in Indo-Pacific Region.”

³⁹“Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang’s Regular Press Conference on July 31, 2018.”

⁴⁰“Defense Ministry’s Regular Press Conference on June 27.”

⁴¹Feng, “China’s Curious Nonchalance Towards the Indo-Pacific.”

⁴²Government think tank analysts and prominent university scholars were prioritized over the larger academic community because they are more likely to be familiar with internal government thinking, and in some cases might even be contributing to official views and responses. For overviews of the links between China’s analytic communities and policymaking, see, for example, Pascal Abb, “China’s Foreign Policy Think Tanks: Institutional Evolution and Changing Roles,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 24, no. 3 (October 2015), 531–553; Linda Jakobson and Dean Knox, *New Foreign Policy Actors in China*, SIPRI Policy Paper 26 (Stockholm: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, September 2010), 34–40; Xuanli Liao, *Chinese Foreign Policy Think Tanks and China’s Policy Towards Japan* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2006); Bonnie S. Glaser and Phillip C. Saunders, “Chinese Civilian Foreign Policy Research Institutes: Evolving Roles and Increasing Influence,” *China Quarterly*, vol. 171 (September 2002), 597–616. The review also incorporates both civilian and military schol-

ars to probe whether there are any differences across bureaucratic lines. These sources are supplemented with the author’s interviews with more than a dozen Chinese civilian and military analysts.

⁴³Ye Hailin, “Prospects for the ‘Indo-Pacific’ Concept and China’s Countermeasures” [“印太”概念的前景与中国的应对策略], *Indian Ocean Economic and Political Review* [印度洋经济体研究], no. 2 (2018), 9.

⁴⁴Liu Fugui and Li Qianqian, “Analysis of the Implementation of the Trump Administration’s Indo-Pacific Strategy” [试论特朗普政府印太战略的实施], *Indian Ocean Economic and Political Review* [印度洋经济体研究], no. 5 (2019), 70.

⁴⁵Ye, “Prospects for the ‘Indo-Pacific’ Concept and China’s Countermeasures,” 6.

⁴⁶He notes, in particular, that all three countries dispatched aircraft carriers to the 2017 version of the event, held in the Indian Ocean. Ye Hailin, “Strategic Thoughts on China’s Response to the U.S. ‘Indo-Pacific’ Concept” [中国应对美国再版“印太”概念的策略性思考], *Indian Ocean Economic and Political Review* [印度洋经济体研究], no. 5 (2019), 132. Ye also describes the exercise “Northern-19,” including U.S., Japanese, and Australian forces operating off Guam, as a key event. *Ibid.*

⁴⁷Chen Jimin, “The Trump Administration’s ‘Indo-Pacific Strategy’: Policy and Limitations” [特朗普政府“印太战略”: 政策与限度], *Peace and Development* [和平与发展], no. 1 (2018), 31–32.

⁴⁸Wu Shengqi and Tao Wenzhao, “The Prospects of the Trump Administration’s Indo-Pacific Strategy” [特朗普政府“印太战略”前瞻], *International Forum* [国际论坛], 20, no. 5 (2018), 34.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 33; Ye, “Prospects for the ‘Indo-Pacific’ Concept and China’s Countermeasures,” 5.

⁵⁰Interviews, 2018. For background, see Manu Pubby, “India, U.S. Ink Comcasa Deal at 2+2 Dialogue,” *Economic Times* (Mumbai), September 7, 2018, available at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/comcasa-india-to-get-access-to-real-time-encrypted-information-from-us/articleshow/65710975.cms>.

⁵¹Many articles also note the name change from U.S. Pacific Command to U.S. Indo-Pacific Command. Notably, there is almost no discussion of specific U.S. military systems allocated to the theater, even though acquisition of advanced technology and concepts represents one plank in the Defense Department’s *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report*.

⁵²See, for example, Li Daguang, “Clues to Trump’s ‘Indo-Pacific Strategy’ from the National Defense Strategy Report” [从国防战略报告看特朗普“印太战略”端倪], *China Economic and Trade Guide* [中国经贸导刊], March 2018, 75; Wu Xinbo, “A New Era of the Trump Administration and U.S. China Policy” [特朗普执政与美国对华政策的新阶段], *China International Studies* [国际问题研究], no. 3 (2018), 85–86; Zhu Feng, “Great Power Contest in the South China Sea Under the Backdrop of the ‘Indo-Pacific Strategy’” [“印太战略”阴影下的南海大国较量], *World Affairs* [世界知识], no. 1 (2018), 20.

⁵³Cheng Hanping and Qu Junfeng, “Intentions of Strengthening U.S.-Vietnam Strategic Cooperation Under the Background of the Indo-Pacific Strategy” [印太战略背景下越美两国深化战略合作意在何方], *Wei Shi* [唯实], no. 7 (2018), 91. Another scholar writes that Secretary of Defense James Mattis traveled to Indonesia and Vietnam early in his tenure to push those countries to serve as “pivotal players” in the region. See Zhang Ling, “An Analysis of the Initial Practice of the U.S. National Security Strategy,” *International Strategic Studies*, vol. 2 (2018), 46.

⁵⁴Wu, “A New Era of the Trump Administration and U.S. China Policy,” 86; Chen, “The Trump Administration’s ‘Indo-Pacific Strategy,’” 13. Fewer articles still reference U.S. relations with small South Asian or Pacific Island nations, or Mongolia, as central to the strategy.

⁵⁵See, for example, Ye Hailin, “Strategic Thoughts on China’s Response to the U.S. ‘Indo-Pacific’ Concept,” 6; Gu Guoli, “The Trump Administration’s ‘Indo-Pacific Strategy’ and Its Progress” [特朗普政府

的“印太战略”及其进展], *International Studies Reference* [国际研究参考], no. 9 (2019), 6.

⁵⁶ Interviews, November 2018.

⁵⁷ Lee Jeong-ho, “U.S. Has No Desire to Contain China, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo Tells Chinese Foreign Ministry Wang Yi in Bangkok,” *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong), August 2, 2019, available at <www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3021012/us-has-no-desire-contain-china-us-secretary-state-mike-pompeo>.

⁵⁸ Several terms are often used interchangeably in these assessments, including 遏制, 牵制, and 包围.

⁵⁹ See, for example, Xia Liping and Zhong Qi, “Analysis of the Trump Administration’s ‘Indo-Pacific Strategy Concept’” [特朗普政府“印太战略构想”评析], *Contemporary International Relations* [现代国际关系], no. 1 (2018), 25; Chen, “Preliminary Analysis of the Trump Administration’s ‘Indo-Pacific Strategy,’” 37–38; Chen, “The Trump Administration’s ‘Indo-Pacific Strategy,’” 40–41. One might expect this view to prevail among civilians, but in fact half of those who acknowledge this motive are People’s Liberation Army scholars.

⁶⁰ See, for example, Chen Jimin, “The Trump Administration’s ‘Indo-Pacific Strategy’: Policy and Limitations” [特朗普政府“印太战略”: 政策与限度], *Peace and Development* [和平与发展], no. 1 (2018), 31–32; Hu Shisheng, “Trump’s ‘Indo-Pacific Strategy’ Concept and Prospects for China-India Interactions” [特朗普的“印太战略”构想与中印互动前景], *World Affairs* [世界知识], no. 5 (2018), 28.

⁶¹ Chen Fangming, “Preliminary Analysis of the Trump Administration’s ‘Indo-Pacific Strategy,’” [特朗普政府“印太战略”初析], *Asia-Pacific Security and Maritime Studies* [亚太安全与海洋研究], no. 4 (2018), 39.

⁶² See, for example, Xia and Zhong, “Analysis of the Trump Administration’s ‘Indo-Pacific Strategy Concept,’” 25; Ge Cheng and Shen Minghui, “‘Indo-Pacific Strategy’ from U.S. and Indian Perspectives: Policy Limitations and China’s Responses” [美印视角下的“印太战略”: 政策限度及中国的应对], *Yunnan Social Sciences* [云南社会科学], no. 5 (2018), 49.

⁶³ Zhang Jiadong, “The U.S. ‘Indo-Pacific’ Concept and Its Influence on China” [美国“印太”倡议及其对中国的影响], *Indian Ocean Economic and Political Review* [印度洋经济体研究], no. 3 (2018), 14. “Offshore balancing” has been discussed by many U.S. strategists over the past 25 years, but Chinese authors appear most influenced by John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011).

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Cai Zebin and Li Demu, “The ‘Indo-Pacific’ Strategy: Retrospect and Prospect” [“印太”战略的缘起、本质及前景], *Strategy and Policy Studies* [战略决策研究], no. 5 (2019), 73.

⁶⁶ Chen, “Preliminary Analysis of the Trump Administration’s ‘Indo-Pacific Strategy,’” 43.

⁶⁷ Xia and Zhong, “Analysis of the Trump Administration’s ‘Indo-Pacific Strategy Concept,’” 28.

⁶⁸ Wei Zongyou, “The Trump Administration’s Indo-Pacific Strategic Concept and Its Impact on Regional Order” [特朗普政府的印太战略构想及其对地区秩序的影响], *Contemporary World* [当代世界], no. 12 (2018), 22.

⁶⁹ See, for example, Zhang, “The U.S. ‘Indo-Pacific’ Concept and Its Influence on China,” 22; Chen, “The Trump Administration’s ‘Indo-Pacific Strategy,’” 14.

⁷⁰ Li, “Clues to Trump’s ‘Indo-Pacific Strategy’ from the National Defense Strategy Report,” 73.

⁷¹ Ye, “Prospects for the ‘Indo-Pacific’ Concept and China’s Countermeasures,” 7–13.

⁷² See, for example, Wu and Tao, “The Prospects of the Trump Administration’s Indo-Pacific Strategy,” 33; Xia and Zhong, “Analysis of the Trump Administration’s ‘Indo-Pacific Strategy,’” 26. See also

Zhang Jiadong, “Trump Cranks Up Pressure on India by Rejecting Invitation,” *Global Times* (Beijing), November 4, 2018, available at <www.globaltimes.cn/content/1125760.shtml>.

⁷³ See, for example, Chen, “Preliminary Analysis of the Trump Administration’s ‘Indo-Pacific Strategy,’” 42.

⁷⁴ Ye, “Strategic Thoughts on China’s Response to the U.S. ‘Indo-Pacific Concept,’” 13–14.

⁷⁵ Chen, “The Trump Administration’s ‘Indo-Pacific Strategy,’” 39–40.

⁷⁶ Qin Sheng, “Policy Implements of the ‘Indo-Pacific’ Strategy in the South Pacific; Status, Dynamics, and Prospects” [“印太”战略的南太平洋攻势: 现状、动力与前景], *Asia-Pacific Security and Ocean Studies* [亚太安全与海洋研究], no. 6 (2019), 94.

⁷⁷ Chen, “The Trump Administration’s ‘Indo-Pacific Strategy,’” 42; Xi and Zhong, “Analysis of the Trump Administration’s ‘Indo-Pacific Strategy Concept,’” 26.

⁷⁸ Xu Nanfeng, “Trump’s ‘America First’ Overdrafts American National Power and Credit,” *International Strategic Studies*, vol. 3 (2018), 16.

⁷⁹ Zhang, “An Analysis of the Initial Phase of the U.S. National Security Strategy,” 47.

⁸⁰ Xia and Zhong, “Analysis of the Trump Administration’s ‘Indo-Pacific Strategy Concept,’” 26.

⁸¹ Wu and Tao, “The Prospects of the Trump Administration’s Indo-Pacific Strategy,” 34; Hu Bo, “Trends and Prospects of the U.S. ‘Indo-Pacific Strategy’” [美国“印太战略”趋势与前景], *Pacific Journal* [太平洋学报], no. 10 (2019), 29.

⁸² See, for example, Xu, “Trump’s ‘America First’ Overdrafts American National Power and Credit,” 12; Ge and Shen, “‘Indo-Pacific Strategy’ from U.S. and Indian Perspectives,” 49; Chen, “Preliminary Analysis of the Trump Administration’s ‘Indo-Pacific Strategy,’” 40.

⁸³ Lu Hong and Sun Xihui, “Structural Dilemma and ‘Trumpism’: Dual Motives of the Trump Administration’s ‘Indo-Pacific Strategy’” [“结构性矛盾”与“特朗普主义”: 特朗普政府“印太战略”的双重动因], *Forum of World Economics & Politics* [世界经济与政治论坛], no. 6 (2018), 25.

⁸⁴ See, for example, Chen, “The Trump Administration’s ‘Indo-Pacific Strategy,’” 45; Xia and Zhong, “Analysis of the Trump Administration’s ‘Indo-Pacific Strategy Concept,’” 28; Wu Zhaoli, “The Indo-Pacific Strategy’s Development, Limitations, and China’s Response” [印太战略的发展、局限及中国应对], *Journal of Xinjiang Normal University* [新疆师范大学学报], no. 5 (2018), 88–89. One scholar even argues that China should study the U.S. Overseas Private Investment Corporation model in order to make the BRI more effective. Gu, “The Trump Administration’s ‘Indo-Pacific Strategy’ and Its Progress,” 8.

⁸⁵ Cheng and Qu, “Intentions of Strengthening U.S.-Vietnam Strategic Cooperation Under the Background of the Indo-Pacific Strategy,” 94.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Hu Zhiyong, “Direction and Geographical Impact of the Trump Administration’s ‘Indo-Pacific’ Security System” [特朗普政府“印太”安全体系走向及其地缘影响], *Journal of Guizhou Provincial Party School* [贵州省党校学报], no. 4 (2019), 110.

⁸⁸ Gu, “The Trump Administration’s ‘Indo-Pacific Strategy’ and Its Progress,” 7.

⁸⁹ See, for example, Ge and Shen, “‘Indo-Pacific Strategy’ from U.S. and Indian Perspectives,” 49–50; Chen, “Preliminary Analysis of the Trump Administration’s ‘Indo-Pacific Strategy,’” 45; and Wang Peng, “‘Hedging’ and ‘Wedging’: Internal Logic of the U.S. ‘Indo-Pacific’ Strategy” [“对冲”与“楔子”: 美国“印太”战略的内生逻辑], *Journal of Contemporary Asia-Pacific Studies* [当代亚太], vol. 3 (2018), 51.

⁹⁰ Hu, “Trump’s ‘Indo-Pacific Strategy’ Concept and Prospects for China-India Interactions,” 30.

⁹¹ Ye, “Prospects for the ‘Indo-Pacific’ Concept and China’s Countermeasures,” 14.

⁹² For instance, Ye writes that officials in Assam have expressed an interest in pursuing the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar economic corridor. Ye, “Strategic Thoughts on China’s Response to the U.S. ‘Indo-Pacific Concept,’” 14.

⁹³ For a discussion, see Peter Harrell, Elizabeth Rosenberg, and Edoardo Saravalle, *China’s Use of Coercive Economic Measures* (Washington, DC: CNAS, 2018).

⁹⁴ An exception is advocacy in one article, written by two People’s Liberation Army analysts, that China should rely on maritime law enforcement to draw “red lines” around Vietnamese developments in the South China Sea. However, the same authors focus more on building strong party-party relations with Vietnam. Cheng and Qu, “Intentions of Strengthening U.S.-Vietnam Strategic Cooperation under the Background of the Indo-Pacific Strategy,” 94.

⁹⁵ Kurt M. Campbell and Rushi Doshi, “The Coronavirus Could Reshape Global Order,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 18, 2020, available at <www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2020-03-18/coronavirus-could-reshape-global-order>.

⁹⁶ Michael Green and Evan S. Medeiros, “The Pandemic Won’t Make China the World’s Leader,” *Foreign Affairs*, April 15, 2020, available at <www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-04-15/pandemic-wont-make-china-worlds-leader>.

⁹⁷ Adam P. Liff, “China and the U.S. Alliance System,” *China Quarterly*, vol. 223 (2018), 137–165; John Garver and Fei-Ling Wang, “China’s Anti-Encirclement Struggle,” *Asian Security* 6, no. 3 (2010), 238–261; Thomas J. Christensen, “China, the U.S.-Japan Alliance, and the Security Dilemma in East Asia,” *International Security* 23, no. 4 (1999), 49–80.

⁹⁸ For a discussion, see Joel Wuthnow, “U.S. ‘Minilateralism’ in Asia and China’s Responses: A New Security Dilemma?” *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 115 (2019), 133–150.

⁹⁹ A limited measure of success, however, is the acknowledgment of some Chinese scholars that the United States is pursuing domestic economic motives.

¹⁰⁰ The Department of Defense made a positive step in dispatching Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for China Chad Sbragia to the 2019 Xiangshan Forum. Sending a higher level official to a future iteration, however, could guarantee a more central speaking role in front of a broad regional audience.

¹⁰¹ According to one analysis, the Indo-Pacific countries at serious risk of debt distress include Laos, Maldives, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, and Pakistan. John Hurlley, Scott Morris, and Gailyn Portelance, *Examining the Debt Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative from a Policy Perspective* (Washington, DC: Center for Global Development, 2018), 12.

¹⁰² See, for example, Evelyn Goh, *Meeting the China Challenge: The U.S. in Southeast Asian Regional Security Strategies* (Washington, DC: East-West Center, 2005); Evelyn Goh, “Southeast Asian Strategies toward the Great Powers: Still Hedging after All These Years?” *The Asian Forum*, February 22, 2016, available at <www.theasianforum.org/southeast-asian-strategies-toward-the-great-powers-still-hedging-after-all-these-years/>; G. John Ikenberry, “Between the Eagle and the Dragon: America, China, and Middle State Strategies in East Asia,” *Political Science Quarterly* 20, no. 20 (2017).

¹⁰³ Feng, “The Recalibration of Chinese Assertiveness,” 23–24.

¹⁰⁴ There is some evidence that China has already begun to recalibrate its Belt and Road Initiative lending to focus more on quality. See, for example, Prashanth Parameswaran, “What’s in China’s New Belt and Road Recalibration?” *The Diplomat*, May 7, 2019, available at <<https://thediplomat.com/2019/05/whats-in-chinas-new-belt-and-road-recalibration/>>; *BRI Update 2019—Recalibration and New Opportunities* (Beijing: Deloitte, 2019).

¹⁰⁵ Some of China’s “assertive” behavior in the South and East China seas has been explained as responses to provocations by others. See Michael D. Swaine and M. Taylor Fravel, “China’s Assertive Behavior Part Two: The Maritime Periphery,” *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 35 (Summer 2011), available at <www.hoover.org/research/chinas-assertive-behavior-part-two-maritime-periphery>.

¹⁰⁶ See, for example, Richard C. Bush, “From Persuasion to Coercion: Beijing’s Approach to Taiwan and Taiwan’s Response,” Brookings Institution, November 2019.

¹⁰⁷ Wu, “A New Era of the Trump Administration and U.S. China Policy,” 86–87; Xia and Zhong, “Analysis of the Trump Administration’s ‘Indo-Pacific Strategy Concept,’” 27.

¹⁰⁸ Gu, “The Trump Administration’s ‘Indo-Pacific Strategy’ and Its Progress,” 8.

¹⁰⁹ Xi and Zhong, “Analysis of the Trump Administration’s ‘Indo-Pacific Strategy Concept,’” 28.

¹¹⁰ Li Bin, “‘Indo-Pacific Strategy’ and the South China Sea: Focus of the Focus” [“印太战略”与南海：焦点中的焦点], *World Affairs* [世界知识], no. 13 (2018), 21.

¹¹¹ Phillip C. Saunders, *The Rebalance to Asia: U.S.-China Relations and Regional Security*, INSS Strategic Forum 281 (Washington, DC: NDU Press, August 2013), 10, available at <<https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratforum/SF-281.pdf>>.

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