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US Discourses and Practices Toward the Indo-Pacific from Obama to Biden: A Constructivist Perspective⁽¹⁾

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Abstract

The US strategy for rebalancing towards Asia has evolved significantly. The fluctuating US orientation towards China invites for further analysis on the influence of subjective interpretations of various US administrations in (a) how they perceived US interests and threats to such interests in the "Indo-Pacific" region, and (b) how these varying perceptions were translated into policy practices. This paper attempts to shed light into the manner in which successive US administrations constructed the Indo-Pacific region, as well as highlighting how this construction translated into specific policies sought to address perceived threats and secure key interests. It also utilizes the securitization approach examining the choice behind which the US securitizes and politicizes alongside discourse analysis to evaluate official government discourses from the three administrations.

Key Words: Indo-Pacific, US, Obama's Rebalance, Trump's Indo-Pacific Strategy, Biden's Indo-Pacific Strategy, China's rise, China's threat to the US, A Constructivist Perspective, US containment of China, US Foreign Policy, US- Asia relations, US discourse, US construction of the Indo-Pacific.

المخلص

الخطابات والممارسات الأمريكية تجاه منطقة المحيطين الهندي والهادئ من أوباما إلى بايدن:

منظور بنائي

تطورت استراتيجية الولايات المتحدة لإعادة التوازن نحو آسيا بشكل جوهري، خاصةً في ظل تغير التحالفات الإقليمية في المنطقة. ولذلك يستدعي التوجه الأمريكي المتقلب تجاه الصين مزيداً من التحليل حول تأثير التفسيرات الذاتية لمختلف الإدارات الأمريكية في (أ) كيفية إدراك الولايات المتحدة لعوامل المصالح والتهديدات في منطقة "المحيطين الهندي والهادئ"، و(ب) كيف تمت ترجمة تلك التفسيرات المتباينة إلى ممارسات سياسية. تحاول هذه الورقة إلقاء الضوء على الطريقة التي بنت بها الإدارات الأمريكية المتعاقبة منطقة المحيطين الهندي والهادئ، والتي بدورها أدت إلى ترجمة هذا البناء إلى سياسات محددة، بهدف معالجة التهديدات المتصورة وتأمين المصالح الوطنية الرئيسية. علاوةً على ذلك، تم استخدام نظرية الأمانة لتحليل الأسباب التي بنى عليها تقوم الولايات المتحدة بإضفاء طابع أمني وتسييس بعض المواضيع، وايضاً تحليل الخطاب لتقييم لغة الخطاب الحكومية الرسمية في الإدارات الثلاث .

الكلمات المفتاحية: المحيطين الهندي والهادئ، الولايات المتحدة، إعادة التوازن لأوباما، استراتيجية ترامب للمحيطين الهندي والهادئ، استراتيجية بايدن للمحيطين الهندي والهادئ، صعود الصين، تهديد الصين للولايات المتحدة، منظور بنائي، احتواء الولايات المتحدة للصين، السياسة الخارجية الأمريكية، العلاقات الأمريكية الآسيوية، الخطاب الأمريكي، بناء الولايات المتحدة من المحيطين الهندي والهادئ.

Introduction

During Barack Obama's first term in office, the US initiated a process aimed at rebalancing towards the "Asia-Pacific". The rise of China, the triumph of the "Factory Asia" model of production, and the changing structure of regional alliances in the area have been the key motives behind this transition. The Trump administration with the same policies, was characterized by a more confrontational approach, identifying the inevitability to respond forcefully to China's destabilizing actions. The election of Joe Biden saw the US working to contain China's rise by openly admitting that China is a 'Strategic Competitor' to the US, whilst toning down the rhetoric vis-à-vis China and stressing the US wish for the competition to not escalate further (Biden, 2021).

The broad territory from Australia to India was referred to as "Asia-Pacific" for decades, while "Indo-Pacific" was frequently used by foreign policy specialists in India, Indonesia, and Australia. Nevertheless, Trump started referring to the region as "Indo-Pacific" in order to differentiate himself from Obama's policies. Moreover, The Trump administration viewed the "Indo-Pacific" as vital because of its expansiveness; it encompasses India and New Zealand, and the US plans to combat China everywhere. The fact that it has been reinforced by Biden administration indicates that the US has become more focused on the wider region specifically on China.

There have been several academic and policy-oriented interpretations on the US strategy and foreign policy towards the wider 'Indo-Pacific' region as well as China. The bulk of these departed explicitly and implicitly from a neo-realist perspective in attempting to advise and understand the fluctuation of US policy between defensive and offensive logics. Indeed, the broad topic of great powers relations and their power balancing dynamics on the system level fits perfectly into the systemic logic of neo-realism. However, the fluctuating US orientation towards China from Obama to Biden, invites for further analysis on the influence of subjective interpretations of various US

administrations in (a) how they perceived US interests and threats to such interests in the “Indo-Pacific” region, and (b) how these varying perceptions were translated into policy practices. In doing so, this paper examines possible continuities and changes in the US’ construction of the Indo-Pacific region commencing with the Obama administration and following through to the current Biden one. Moreover, it sheds light into the manner in which the US perceives possible threats and interests in the region, as well as tracing the mapping of the region by the three administrations. Finally, this paper examines the way in which the construction of the region translated into concrete political action.

Moreover, the present paper adds to the literature by bringing in the lens of constructivism and employing an agent-oriented approach. Indeed, it argues that it is noteworthy to investigate how three different US administrations developed their perceptions of China and the surrounding region. In order to do so, this paper utilizes the securitization approach seen as the best suited for examining what the US chooses to securitize and politicize, as well as discourse analysis so as to evaluate official government materials from the three administrations. After a thorough comparative examination of the discourse of the three successive administrations of Obama, Trump, and Biden; a noticeable pattern of continuity of US perceptions and policies toward the region, with some differences in how these perceptions were translated into policy practices was revealed. The paper is divided into two main parts. The first compares and contrasts the representation of the "Indo-Pacific" region, US interests, and perceived threats by the three US administrations. The second one compares and contrasts how the projection of this construction translates into policy practices vis-à-vis the region in general, as well as China in particular.

Overview of the Literature

There have been two strands of literature on this. The first addresses the centrality of China's rise in the Asia-Pacific region and the inevitability of US-Chinese competition. John Mearsheimer is one of the most vocal critics of China's 'peaceful rise' in this regard. His pessimism about China's peaceful rise is supported by a forceful expression of combative realism. Mearsheimer (2010) argues that it is impossible to accurately predict China's present or future intentions, that it is difficult to differentiate between China's offensive and defensive military capabilities, and that China's past peaceful behaviour

is an unreliable indicator of its future behaviour; the same is true for the US. Consequently, both states will compete for power, resulting in a security battle with the potential for war as China's rise cannot be peaceful. Since the US and the majority of China's neighbours seek to contain China, China will eventually seek regional supremacy (Mearsheimer, 2010). In addition, Thucydides' Trap carries the possibility that an unanticipated occurrence will spark a large-scale conflict. When a rising power threatens to dethrone a dominant power, conventional calamities can set off a chain reaction that ultimately results in outcomes where neither state would have chosen, according to Alisson (2015) and Peng (2016). This idea is supported by a number of prominent realists, such as Kenneth Waltz and Yuankang Wang (Waltz 1979, Wang, 2004, Deng, 2001). Some realist academics (Johnston, 2003; Kissinger, 2012) believe that Mearsheimer's theory of offensive realism is incorrect in this instance, as his premise that China will pose a threat to the US is based exclusively on historical references. While Mearsheimer's theory is efficient in explaining US foreign policy, this does not imply that it can effectively define the full picture of contemporary Chinese regional strategy and foreign policy.

The second thread addresses the implausibility of the US choosing hard balancing over soft balancing. According to scholars such as He Feng (2008), Paul (2005), and Silove (2016), the US policy toward China is influenced by both liberal ideology and material power ambitions. Based on liberal thought, economic engagement seeks to push China to integrate into the global community and establish itself as a status quo power in the international arena. Despite this, the US' concern over relative dominance compels it to undertake realism balancing strategies against China. Realist balancing and liberal interaction are intricately connected. If economic engagement increases the US' economic dependence on China, the US will be pushed to embrace soft balancing rather than hard balancing toward China. If economic engagement increases China's military and economic expansion, the US will be under greater pressure to embrace a hard-balancing strategy. Military enmity predicated on a hard-balancing approach is less realistic if China's rise does not rely on the US' demise. Soft balancing is becoming an important strategic communication activity between both states.

None of the enormous literature on US strategy and perception uses constructivist theory and its methodologies to examine US interests and

threats, as well as their evolving strategies toward the 'Indo-Pacific' region. This demonstrates the need for additional research from this constructivist theoretical perspective to gain a deeper understanding of the shifting US approaches toward China and the wider region.

Introducing Constructivism

A constructivist perspective asserts that states and policymakers create the world in which they live; in other words, it integrates ideational and material components. Constructivism characterizes international politics as "socially constructed" phenomena, as articulated by Alexander Wendt (1992). According to Wendt, constructivism has two essential tenants: a) shared ideas, rather than material forces, establish the patterns of human relationships; and b) shared ideas, rather than nature, construct the values and interests of purposeful humans (Wendt, 1992). Given that shared beliefs are the driving factor behind Wendt's constructivism, it is evident that ideas influence the very interests for which nations seek. Wendt contends, ideas constitute power and interest (Wendt, 1992). Each state or actor has a differentiated understanding of concepts. Therefore, what a state perceives as a threat or an interest to itself may not be perceived the same way by another regime within the same state. 'We make the world what it is by interacting with each other and saying what we say to each other; saying is doing; talking is undoubtedly doubt the most important way that we make the world what it is,' argues Nicholas Onuf (1989), another constructivist scholar, since constructivism holds that individuals and societies construct one another. Onuf (1989) also presents the concept of 'speech acts,' which are regarded as the act of talking that leads another person to behave. Even more crucially, the repeat of the speech acts induces others to assume that this repetition has significance. Consequently, if the US continues to discursively build China as a rival or foe, it will ultimately create this atmosphere through speech acts. By discursively depicting China in such a manner, it follows suit that the US will attempt to couple this with the necessary policy practices. The present paper aims at doing exactly this; trace the discursive mapping of the region and connect to the policies through which the US attempts to maximize its perceived interests within it.

US Representation of the Indo-Pacific Region: Interests and Threats from Obama to Biden

The US Construction of the Indo-Pacific Region

The rising importance of the Indo-Pacific region to US national interests has compelled successive administrations to adopt the Indo-Pacific strategy (Cossa, 2009; the White House, 2022). This strategy is based on an initial discursive construction of the region, followed by a thorough mapping of the US interests, perceived threats, as well as labelling of states within it as allies or possible competitors. By establishing this mapping, the US administrations were, thus, able to bring forward the necessary policies in order to maximize interests, address threats, and strengthen ties within the Indo-Pacific.

The Obama administration utilized the term "Asia-Pacific" frequently. The Trump administration introduced the term Indo-Pacific in an attempt to replace it and widen the area surrounding its major competitor; China. This modification is now embedded in US policy (Heiduk, 2020). The Indo-Pacific region has been and continues to be a "high priority" of US foreign policy, and its main reason is the rise of China in the region and the necessity to contain it (The White House, 2015; 2019; 2022). The Indo-Pacific was deemed "essential" to the economy and security of the US by all three administrations, and hence it was given top priority on their foreign policy agendas. According to the three administrations, Asia and the Pacific is transforming into the economic and political center of the world, as it is the most economically vibrant and populated region holding the world's strongest militaries (The White House, 2015; 2021, 2022). All three administrations believed that the economic success and security of the US depended on free and open access to the Indo-Pacific region, which allowed the growth of commerce and investment. Consequently, the perception of the Indo-Pacific is that the region has undergone a remarkable transformation in which millions of people have soared out of poverty and the region has become a home for businesses worldwide and an effective source of global economic development due to a free and open regional order that ensured an equitable and stable arena in which sovereign states can thrive and prosper. As Trump remarked, the Indo-Pacific region has evolved into a "beautiful constellation

of nations" and is continuing to flourish; as a result, its strategic and economic significance to the US grows daily (The White House, 2017; 2018).

- **Mapping the Indo-Pacific**

According to social constructivist theory, the term "Indo-Pacific" represents a new social construct composed of shared identities and values. Consequently, US administrations attempted to utilize liberal democratic values in order to forge an alliance amongst the liberal-democratic governments of the region against the rise of "Chinese Communist Party (The White House, 2020). This part compares and contrasts the perceived interests and threats; along with the way through which each administration presented these interests and threats; besides, investigating the role of China in the development of these regarded threats and interests.

China is seen by the US as attempting to maximize its influence in the Indo-Pacific by combining its economic, political, military, and technological capabilities (The White House, 2022). China has put a portion of its economic growth in the modernization of its military, which now poses a danger to American hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region. Moreover, China is an important economic partner of traditional enemies of the US in the region, namely Iran and North Korea, which gives it political influence to apply pressure on both countries.

The three administrations have consistently held the belief that China seeks to challenge US power, impede US prosperity and stability (The White House, 2015;2017;2022). This is most notably done through introducing a containment element to US-China policy; expanding the US military presence; and intending to hinder China's economic and military development under Obama. Similarly, Trump established a strategy of containment and increased criticism of China in official speeches. An instance of this can be seen in October 2020, when National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien spoke to China as "the threat of the century" (Hepher, 2020). Biden's policy has been identical to Trump's with one exception: Biden is cooperating with the US closest allies in Europe and Asia to control and combat China. The Biden administration turned to liberal multilateralism replacing the realist/conservative bilateralism of the Trump administration. China's rise is the primary threat to US key interests, including but not limited to maritime access, nuclear proliferation, and overall economic security. In defining these areas, the US not only identified its perceived interests and potential threats

to its position, but also attempted to create a uniform front amongst its regional allies.

The growing power of China's military has alarmed its neighbours, who are similarly reliant on China for their economic growth. The three administrations believed that China's rise has disrupted the historical balance of power in East Asia, as opposed to sustaining it. (Cossa 2009, State Government 2020; US Government 2018). Obama has stressed that cooperation with ASEAN and Southeast Asia is "central" to creating prosperity and stability in the area and establishing laws that are followed by all states (White House in 2016). In a speech in the Philippines, Trump also acknowledges 40 years of friendship and collaboration between the US and the ASEAN and affirms his commitment to maintaining this partnership (US mission in Laos, 2017). Furthermore, Biden remarked that the significance of ASEAN is at the "center" of his administration's strategy for pursuing the future that all desire" (The White House, 2022). Biden noted that the relationship between the US and ASEAN is "vital" to maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific region (The White House, 2021). The three administrations' foreign policies also have as a primary objective which is the consolidation of alliances in the region. Obama, Trump, and Biden adhere to the opinion that the US cannot enhance its power and influence in the region without the support of its allies. Consequently, the US policy incorporates all of its connections with significant players. The Indo-Pacific Strategy of the three administrations places allies and partners at the forefront of preserving the regional order of freedom and transparency (The White House, 2015; 2021; DOD, 2018; 2019).

Mapping US Allies, Friends, and Enemies in the Indo-Pacific

Understanding how each administration tries to shape US foreign policy in response to the issues of the twenty-first century is essential. The mapping of allies and enemies has a significant impact on the formation of each administration's policy. Nonetheless, a pattern of continuity involving longstanding allies and adversaries can be observed across the three administrations. This section aims to explain the similarities and contrasts between administrations by analysing how each administration regarded friends, allies, and enemies.

- **Japan, Australia, and South Korea: traditional and historical allies**

The US has viewed the US-Japan Alliance as the foundation for regional peace and stability, as well as global cooperation, under all three administrations. According to the US, the US-Japan relationship is based on trust, a common vision of international order rules, a dedication to preserving democratic ideals, encouraging open markets, and deep cultural ties. Consequently, the three administrations affirmed in their speeches that the US-Japan alliance is the "cornerstone of peace and security in the Pacific region" and is "unwavering" and "unshakeable" (The White House, 2013; 2014 ;2017 ;2021 ;2022). Similarly, the US and Australia have been strong allies for years which is considered a "global partner" by the three governments (The White House, 2011; 2022; DOS, 2022). South Korea is another close ally of the US. As stated by the three administrations, this alliance remains the "linchpin" of peace and security across the entire region, not just on the Korean Peninsula. In addition, the goal of North Korea's complete denuclearization through peaceful methods is shared by the three administrations as a cause to build this partnership (Obama, 2016; The White House, 2021; Government Information, 2017). Trump yet accused the nation of "free-riding" and said that the US receives "practically nothing" relative to the cost" of the partnership (Work, 2020).

- **India: A security “Partner” and a Controversial “Ally”**

The US-India strategic alliance is built on shared values, such as a commitment to democracy and the maintenance of a rules-based international system. Obama and Trump agree that India is a "true global partner" for the US in bolstering strong economies and democracies and that the two nations are "natural partners" (The White House, 2009 ;2015; 2017). Similarly, Biden underlined the durability of the US and India's defence partnership and the commitment of US to India as a "major defence partner" through robust defence engagements and military-to-military contacts (The White House, 2021). Yet, Biden referred to India as "shaky" after India failed to join the chorus condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Das, 2022).

- **Philippine and Thailand: “Vital Partners”**

As stated by the three administrations, the two US allies in Southeast Asia; Philippines and Thailand, pose significant risks to US defence policy and national security objectives (CSIS, 2021). In recent years, a shifting strategic environment, changeable internal politics and China's rising

influence and persistent outreach have considerably weakened the relationship between the US, Philippines and Thailand. Even so, these two Southeast Asian allies continue to be essential to the US, both for the advantages of bilateral cooperation during peacetime and for their position in US defence preparing above or below the conflict criterion; therefore, it is essential to remain with "long lasting alliances" such as Thailand and the Philippines (The White House, 2013;2018;2022).

- **US Enemies in the Region: China and North Korea**

A. China

While Obama did not refer to China as an "enemy" but as a "partner," the central reason for his "pivot" towards Asia was the development of rising economies, most particularly China, and the development of the "Factory Asia" production version (Government Information, 2016). Contrary to Obama, Trump claimed on Twitter in 2011 that "China is neither an ally nor a friend; they want to beat us and own our country." Nonetheless, Trump made numerous statements criticizing "China's unfair trade tactics" (The White House, 2018). Trump also described China as the US principal adversary power and as a "currency manipulator" (Wang, 2019). Biden considers the US-China relationship through the lens of strategic competition, which is similar to Trump's perspective (DOS, 2021; Biden, 2021).

B. North Korea

In spite of the fact that the policies of the three administrations regarding North Korea diverged, a consistent view is evident in their discourses. The goal of all administrations is "complete denuclearization" of the Korean Peninsula. Moreover, they viewed North Korea as a "threat" to US national security (The White House, 2009 ;2017 ;2021).

- **US Interests projected in the Indo-Pacific Region**

The paper's empirical part has revealed a number of perceived interests and threats that the US has utilized in order to create a unified front of regional actors against the rise of China. These axes are constituted by maritime access, nuclear proliferation, economic security, climate change, as well as cyber-security.

In their Indo-Pacific strategies, Obama, Trump, and Biden view maritime access as crucial. The most important aspect of Obama's policy shift was the placement of maritime geography at the centre of international

security debate. The three administrations wanted to protect maritime security and prevent China from exerting its influence in the South and Southeast, distinguishing that "peace and security in the maritime domain underpins the development and prosperity of the Indo-Pacific" (The White House, 2011 ;2019; 2021; 2022). In light of China's rise, one of the three administrations' primary objectives is to keep Asia open and free, ensure navigational freedom, maritime access, protect international law, promote peaceful management and dispute resolution, which are essential to the US national global security (The White House, 2015; 2019;2022). As China has become more forceful, it has been more difficult for the US to protect free passage. The US maritime policy posture has stayed essentially similar across administrations: sustaining open commerce routes and ensuring freedom of navigation. The Obama administration therefore considered the South China Sea (SCS) as a "vital" route for world energy and commerce (DOS, 2012). Obama was able to maintain his principal objective of encouraging unrestricted economic passage and navigation by refraining from labelling China's claims in the SCS as "illegal." Instead, he referred to these claims as "destabilizing" or "aggressive" (US Government, 2015). In comparison, then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo contradicted the previous administration by claiming that China's claims to marine and coastal areas in the bulk of the SCS are illegitimate (DOS, 2020). In response to Trump's assessment of China's claims in the SCS, the Biden administration criticized China of establishing "unlawful" and "coercive" maritime claims and operations in the SCS (The White House, 2022). The fundamental objective has remained the same across all three administrations, namely the protection of free navigation (DOS, 2015; 2020; the White House, 2022).

Obama, Trump, and Biden continue to characterize nuclear proliferation in the Indo-Pacific region as an immediate threat that must be handled. North Korea's ongoing nuclear and missile programs and proliferation activities pose a clear and "grave" threat to US and allied national security. (The White House, 2015; 2020; 2021). The three administrations are aware of the threat North Korea poses to the interests and allies of the US. To maintain peace and security in the region, the administrations reaffirmed their unwavering dedication to the complete and verifiable denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula (The White House, 2015;2020; DOD, 2021).

In addition to concerns about unfair trade practices under the Trump administration, the US has expressed concern about China's enormous financial support for infrastructural development in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond as part of its Belt and Road initiative (BRI), which aims to provide financing and investment for infrastructure development across the Eurasian landmass. Obama and Trump both maintained that "economic security and national security" are interrelated (The White House, 2015; 2017). The US attempts to integrate more economically with countries in the region were applauded, especially to counter China's growing economic power and to promote private sector participation. China's BRI poses a new geo-economics threat and contributes to regional perceptions of China's rise and the US relative decline, based on the Trump and Biden administrations. (The White House, 2018; 2022)

Cyber-threats and climate change have been portrayed as threats to US national security by all three administrations. In US-China relations, cyber security has been a complex and sensitive topic. In 2009, Obama characterized cybersecurity as one of the "most serious economic and national security challenges" confronting the US and the region (The White House, 2009). Additionally, in his statement on National Cybersecurity Awareness, Trump stated that his administration acknowledges the significance of cyberspace protection to the national and economic security of the US (The White House, 2019; 2021). Likewise, Biden has been concerned about China's irresponsible and destabilizing internet behaviour.

Threats posed by climate change received consistent attention from all three administrations (The White House, 2009; 2020; 2022). Unlike his predecessors, Obama did not criticise China for climate change, but rather argued that the country with the highest rate of carbon pollution growth should join the US as the global leader in carbon reduction (CNN, 2014). Trump, however, has claimed that Beijing is the largest emitter of greenhouse gases; the largest provider of marine debris; the worst abuser of illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing; and the biggest consumer of animals and wood products. In addition, Biden characterized climate change as an "existential threat"; therefore, he condemned China for its lack of leadership over the challenge of climate change (The White House, 2022).

- **Strengthening US military presence in the region**

In 2009, the US has roughly 79,000 military personnel stationed in Asia-Pacific. Obama pledged to increase the proportion of the US Navy's force in the Pacific to 60 percent by 2020. (Turner, 2020). Former US secretary of defence under the Trump administration, Mark Esper, acknowledged the need of military development in the region and presented an ambitious plan to equip the US Navy with a range of automated submarines, ships, and aircraft to fight China's growing maritime challenge. Esper indicated that a thorough evaluation of US naval capacity entitled "Future Forward" revealed a "game-changing" plan to expand the US Sea fleet to over 355 ships, up from the current 293 ships (The Guardian, 2020). This strategy seeks to maintain superiority against Chinese naval forces, which are considered as the greatest threat to the US. In response to China's strategic rivalry, Biden plans to raise the US naval fleet to nearly 500 ships by 2045 to deter Chinese attack (The Guardian, 2022).

Maritime access is a priority for the three administrations. Obama enhanced US support for marine capacity building by spending \$119 million in 2015 and proposing \$140 million in 2016 (The White House, 2015). Similar to Obama, in May 2019, the US engaged in the first joint crossing of the SCS by the navies of the US, India, Japan, and the Philippines. In addition, the US have allocated about \$1.1 billion for security cooperation between USAID and the DOS in South and Southeast Asia. Included in this amount are \$356 million for the Southeast Asia Maritime Security Initiative (SAMSI) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative. During the same time frame, the DOD Maritime Security Initiative and "Section 333" monies allocated around \$250 million for marine security in the region to enhance information sharing, connectivity, and international maritime collaborations (DOS, 2019). Biden's Indo-Pacific strategy stresses the Coast Guard's leadership role in maritime security cooperation in the region through deployment, instruction, training, and capacity-building.

- **Political Engagement in Regional Conflicts**

Along with alliance and security cooperation, the US seeks to hinder China from attaining its hegemonic objectives and disturbing the status quo in the region. Thus, the US intervenes in regional conflicts to promote peace, stability and ensure its influence by preventing arms races, disputes,

nuclear proliferation, breaches of human rights, and developing military connections within the region.

In reaction to North Korea's persistent pursuit of its nuclear program and phases of escalation, Obama pursued a 'strategic patience' policy, including strong cooperation with US allies, the Republic of Korea (ROK), Japan, as well as China, in dissuading and reacting to North Korean aggressive actions, as well as pressuring Pyongyang via sanctions to halt its nuclear advancement (Avery, 2018). North Korea continued its provocative behaviour under the Trump administration. In response, Trump has devised a new North Korea policy and enacted defensive measures to bolster its deterrence, dubbed 'Strategic Accountability', with an emphasis on 'maximum pressure and engagement' toward the disarmament of the communist regime. (Chung, 2017). However, in June 2018, Trump held a one-day summit with North Korean leader Kim, resulting in a dramatic shift. Both presidents signed a statement stating Pyongyang's commitment to the "complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula" (The White House, 2018). Biden, seeking a middle ground between Obama's strategic patience and Trump's strategic responsibility, decides to defer interaction with North Korea until it modifies its behaviour.

With each successive administration and policy, relationships between the US, China, and the Republic of China (Taiwan) are constantly changing. Akin to his predecessor, Obama had a dual policy with Taiwan. On one hand, Obama was obligated to the One China Policy, where he encouraged the improvement of peaceful relations between China and Taiwan. On the other hand, Obama continued to elevate and advance US-Taiwan relations through the development of economic, trade ties, arms sales, and support for Taiwan's participation in the international arena. Trump's China strategy, like Obama's, stressed on the importance of Taiwan. On December 2, 2016, Trump and Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen held a brief chat. Given the unofficial nature of US-Taiwan relations, this was vital. In addition, Trump enacted the Taiwan Travel Act (TTA), allowing high-ranking Taiwanese officials to enter the US (The Guardian, 2016). On his first day in office, Biden wished to give Taiwan a clear statement of support by inviting Taiwan's de facto ambassador, Hsiao Bi-khim, to the presidential inauguration ceremony for the first time since 1979. Furthermore, the Biden

administration has restated its commitment to preserving the US military and political obligations to Taiwan under the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA).

As for the situation in Hong Kong, pro-democracy demonstrations began in 2014, with tens of thousands of individuals demonstrating significant support for enabling locals to elect their own leaders despite Beijing's involvement. Obama added that he had conveyed to Xi that "the US will consistently work to ensure that the elections in Hong Kong are fair for all citizens" (Bush, 2014). In November 2019, Trump followed Obama's approach and signed legislation backing pro-democracy activists in Hong Kong. China's acts to powerfully weaken Hong Kong's authority present an unusual threat to the US economy, foreign policy, and national security. In response to this threat, Trump declared a state of emergency in Executive Order 13936, which was supported by Biden, who stated that it is necessary to maintain the national emergency. (The White House, 2022)

US Policy Practices Toward the "Indo-Pacific": The Political, Security, and Economic Dimensions

In the context of intensifying strategic competition between the US and China, the US strategy toward the region over the course of three administrations aims to uphold stability, stimulate economic growth, encourage further democratization, and defend US and allied interests. As discussed in the previous part of this paper, successive US administrations were successful in the construction and mapping of the region and they quite consistently albeit with changes in their rhetoric, took the necessary steps in order to address the perceived threats, as well as capitalize their perceived interests. In doing so, US administrations, starting with the Obama one, sought to act on multiple levels. On the political one, the US attempted to strengthen their ties with traditional allies, as well as creating new ones.

This way the US was able to address the various security concerns stemming from the rise of China in the region. Concurrently, the US deepened its economic ties with regional actors. This part will attempt to shed light to the various types of engagement with the region and highlight the manner in which the US utilized its mapping of it, as discussed in the previous part. Over the course of three administrations, the US sought to improve and enlarge bilateral and multilateral alliances and to reinforce strategic partnerships with traditional alliances, as well as to develop regional maritime potentials and

maritime domains through maritime exercises with other states in order to guarantee and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region.

- **Bolstering traditional alliances**

Obama's first priority was to strengthen relationships and partnerships. He opted for a much more systematic approach, focusing not only on convention allies like the Philippines and Thailand, but also on approving a series of integrated and lasting partnerships with major Southeast Asian states such as Indonesia, Vietnam, and Malaysia, and instituting partnerships with nations like Myanmar (Parameswaran, 2014). Regarding its attitude in Asia, Trump has sent inconsistent messages. The Administration's 2018 National Defence Strategy emphasized the need to "Strengthen Alliances and Attract New Partners." (DOD, 2018). Trump has become less engaged in regional affairs, assigning lower-level officials to crucial regional meetings, withdrawing from the proposed TPP trade agreement, and cancelling joint military drills with South Korea. In addition, Trump explicitly questioned the viability of a number of US alliances, most notably those with Japan and South Korea. The US would "forge stronger connections" with allies in the region and strengthen its collaboration with ASEAN, as indicated by US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken's comments (Pomerleau, 2021).

Additionally, the importance of multilateralism as the basis for any US strategy was an obvious aspect of Obama's pivot. In November 2011, Obama was the first president to attend the East Asia Summit (EAS). In contrast, Trump's approach to Asia changed dramatically. Trump, a self-described "dealmaker," was determined to negotiate a "better deal" for the US. He argued that this might be accomplished through bilateral and transactional engagements on commerce, security, and investment, where the greater size of the state provides negotiating leverage (Hass, 2020). Akin to the Obama strategy, the Biden approach emphasizes the importance of multilateralism for Indo-Pacific stability, with an emphasis on ASEAN's role in addressing "the region's most pressing challenges" and a request for "a team effort" by allies both within and beyond the region (Chen, 2022). Moreover, the Biden administration appears keener to support allies and partners in acquiring access to innovative defence technologies and systems, and also to streamline engagement on future capabilities (Lee, 2022).

- **Multilateral Agreements**

The Obama administration intended to expand economic engagement in the region. In 2009, US-led initiatives such as the Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI) developed a relationship between the US and the Mekong sub-region countries. This program was designed to encourage collaboration within the sub-region and among ASEAN nations (The White House, 2016). Obama had also started Third Country Training Program relationships with regional states such as Singapore, demonstrating his administration's commitment to boosting the ability of less developed regional states (Parameswaran, 2016). In 2011, Obama also established a Trilateral Dialogue with India and Japan as well as a strategic one with Australia and Japan. Under Trump, both of these persisted, and in 2018, they expanded with the assistance of a joint infrastructure strategy.

However, a few days after becoming office, Trump withdrew from the TPP on the grounds that it will raise the US trade deficit, push more manufacturing jobs overseas, and fail to deal with and resolve currency manipulation by US trading partners. This withdrawal raised worries among allies regarding the nation's reliability on a variety of foreign and economic matters. Trump has prioritized participation in the Mekong region in Southeast Asia, particularly the formation of a new US-Japan partnership (Ford, 2020). Trump's efforts to revitalize the Quadrilateral Dialogue between the US, Australia, India, and Japan have garnered significant attention. The US, its allies India, Australia, South Korea, and Japan, and emerging nations Malaysia, Vietnam, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand proposed an Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity under the Biden administration (IPEF). The accord aims to restore US economic leadership in the region as well as provide Indo-Pacific states with an alternative to China's approach. (The White House, 2022).

- **Aid (Data last updated on: 02/24/2021)**

The US Agency for International Development (USAID) plays a vital role in ensuring that Asian countries' development policies assist in achieving fair and sustainable long-term prosperity. USAID promotes US economic and security objectives via the development of a more prosperous Asia. Even while Asian countries have very varied development levels and needs, their interconnection, from supply and commerce networks to infrastructure and health, presents potential for the US.

**A. Economic Aid to Indo Pacific Countries (in millions USD)
 (Foreign Assistance, 2021)**

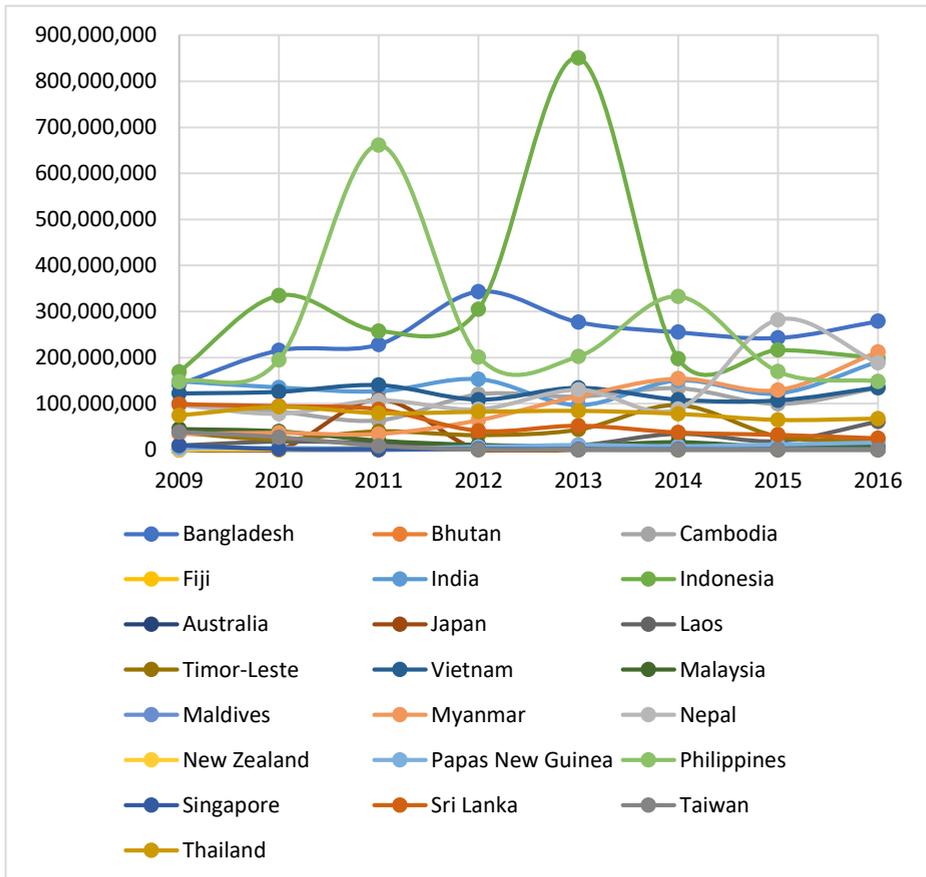


Figure 1 Economic Aid to Indo Pacific Countries (in millions USD) under Obama (Foreign assistance, 2021)

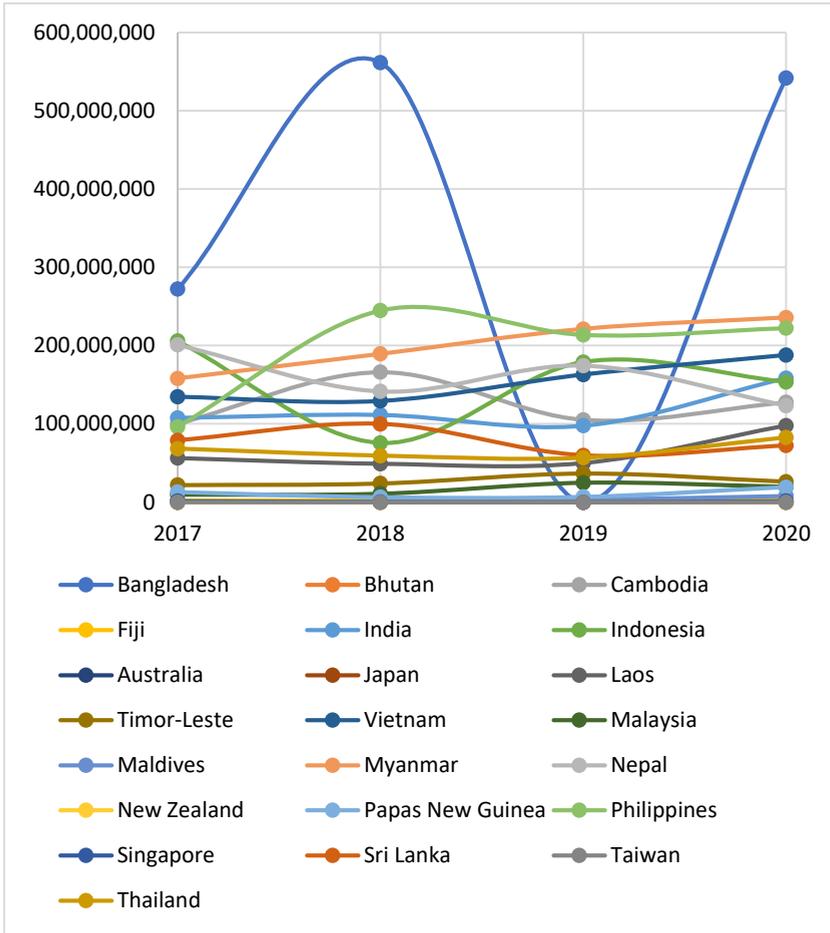


Figure 2 Economic Aid to Indo Pacific Countries (in millions USD) under Trump (Foreign assistance, 2021)

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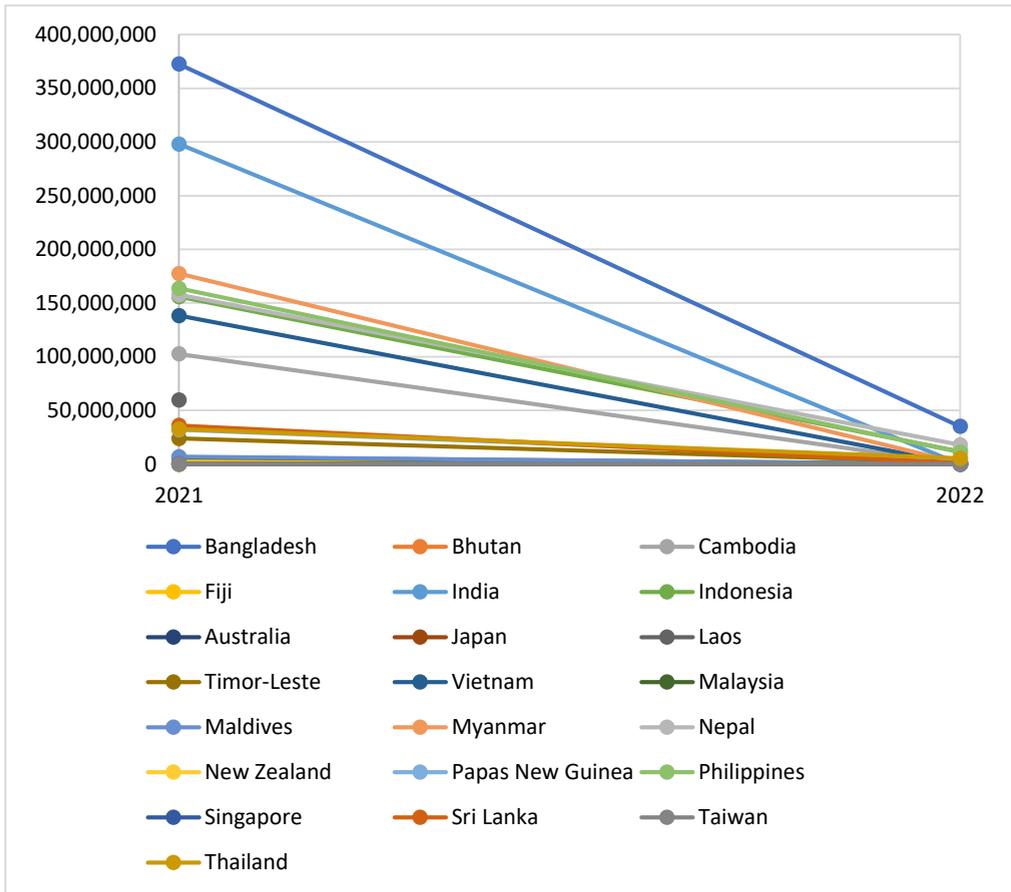


Figure 3 Economic Aid to Indo Pacific Countries (in millions USD) under Biden (Foreign assistance, 2021)

Under the Obama administration, US economic aid to Indonesia, a key partner in the region, was prioritized. Indonesia is the world's third largest democracy and a leader in ASEAN. Thus, USAID work with the Indonesian partner to achieve shared security and economic objectives to develop a stable and resilient Indonesia. Moreover, Indonesia is an important market for US goods and investments due to its growing middle class, powerful domestic demand, large and young population, and a requirement for new infrastructure, particularly a quickly rising digital economy.

In contrast, the Trump and Biden administrations have prioritized Bangladesh, which currently receives the most US economic aid in Asia. Bangladesh's exceptional economic growth and receptivity to private US investment presents a chance for US enterprises and those of US partners

to enter the Bangladeshi market. In 2021, the US imported Bangladeshi goods worth \$8.3 billion, making it the country's highest importer (DOS, 2022).

**B. US Military AID to Indo Pacific Countries (in millions USD)
(ForeignAssistance.gov, 2022)**

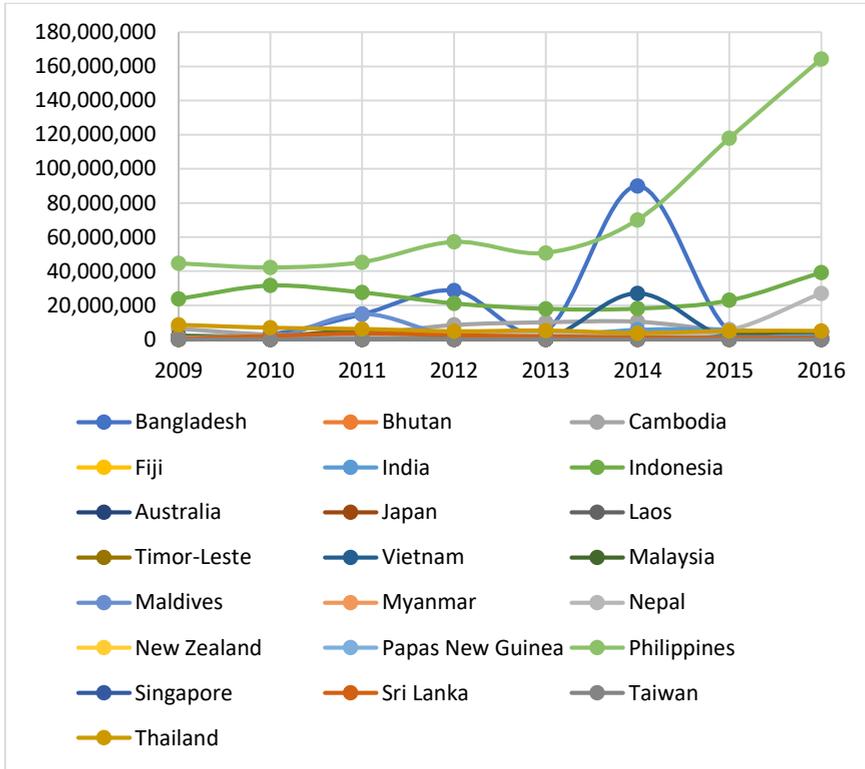
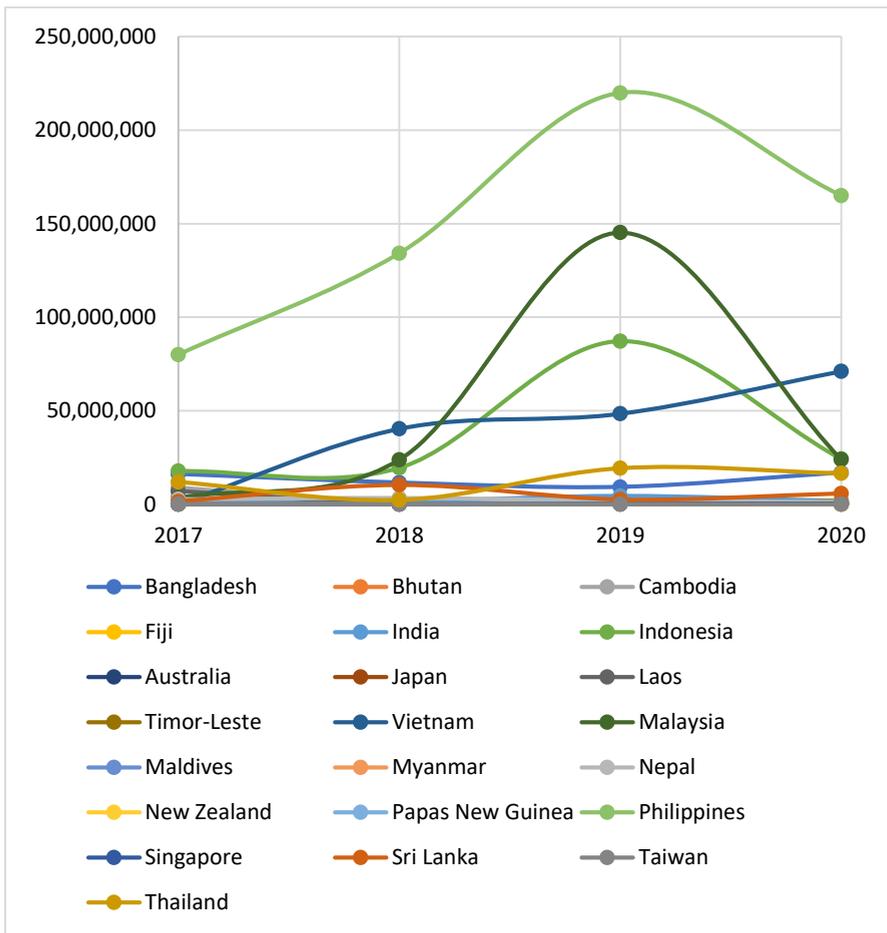


Figure 4 US Military AID to Indo Pacific Countries (in millions USD) under Obama (Foreign assistance, 2021)



As for the military aid, all three administrations follow a similar pattern, making the Philippines the largest recipient of USAID funds. Due of its strategic significance, the US is able to collaborate with the Philippines in adopting tactics to counter Chinese military aggressiveness in the SCS.

Figure 5 U.S. Military AID to Indo Pacific Countries (in millions USD) under Trump (Foreign assistance, 2021)

- **Trade**

Throughout Obama's two terms, trade was not only about economic benefits, but also a source of security that supported economic cooperation and international partnerships, as protected by an international body of law. In 2012, the US became China's largest trading partner, with bilateral trade reaching \$536 billion. In addition, the Obama administration released the Global Procurement Initiative in 2013, with the intention of empowering

developing nations with a framework for more open procurement activities, enhanced methods for evaluating fair value for purchases, and assistance in selecting sustainable infrastructure. In spite of this, the US objectives have switched from maintaining a global economic order to rebuilding American industry. In January of 2018, Trump authorized global protection taxes on \$1.8 billion worth of washing machines and \$8.5 billion worth of solar panel imports. In March 2018, Trump announced 25% tariffs on steel and 10% tariffs on aluminium for all trading partners, claiming national security considerations. (Bown, 2019).

Trump verified his assertion that "trade wars with China are good and easy to win" (Franck, 2018). In March 2018, his administration imposed a 25% tax on steel and a 10% duty on aluminium. When Trump recognized a chance to reduce the US trade deficit, he expanded the scope and placed 10% tariffs on Chinese imports worth \$300 billion (BBC report, 2020). China and the US declared progress development in trade conversations at the end of 2019 after months of such pressures. Under an effort to minimize the trade deficit, China guaranteed in the 'Phase One' agreement that it would expand imports of US goods and services by at least \$200 billion in subsequent years (The White House, 2020). Furthermore, the administration of Biden has launched a new trade pact with 12 Indo-Pacific nations in May 2022 in an effort to improve their economies.

Monitory and Investment

Obama desired to negotiate investment treaties with key regional states and to strengthen private sector cooperation for recognizing and grabbing possibilities in Asia (White House, 2015). In October 2018, the US Senate joined the House of Representatives in approving the Better Utilization of Investment Leading to Development Act (BUILD Act), which established the US International Development Finance Corporation (USIDFC). One year later, during the Indo-Pacific Business Forum in Thailand, led by the US, Australia, and Japan, Trump publicly embraced the Blue Dot Network concept, which was intended to be a multi-stakeholder initiative that brings together states, the private sector, and civil society to dramatically improve the credibility of infrastructure development standards. Through the Indo-Pacific Business Forum, where the US has contributed \$113 million to promote regional projects in the digital economy, infrastructure, and energy sectors, Trump has increased US investment in the

region (Pompeo, 2018). The US Department of Commerce announced that it had assisted more than 9,000 US enterprises in conducting business within the region and authorized more than \$7.65 billion in US exports, of which \$3.1 billion was for government contracts acquired by US corporations. Correspondingly, Biden proposed \$1.8 billion to strengthen his Indo-Pacific Strategy and US\$ 400 million to oppose Chinese aggression. (The White House, 2022).

a. FDI with Regional States to Counterbalance Chinese devaluation

The People's Bank of China (PBOC) stunned the markets by devaluing the Chinese yuan three times in a row, on August 11, 2015, lowering its value by over 3%. The Chinese yuan has acquired 33% against the US dollar since 2005. By devaluing its currency, China was able to cut the price of its exports and gain a competitive advantage in the worldwide market. Conversely, a weaker currency made China's purchases more expensive, which spurred the production of domestic alternatives to assist domestic enterprises. (Investopedia, 2021). The Trump Administration, which aimed to block the entry of Chinese goods into the US by applying high tariffs, feared that the influx of Chinese goods could harm the business of domestic US manufacturers. Trump's identification of China as a "currency manipulator" was largely symbolic, but it signified weakening economic relations between the US and China (Perumal, 2019).

Consequently, the US became the major provider of foreign direct investment (FDI) in the Indo-Pacific region with the aim to combat Chinese devaluation. From 2009 through 2021, as depicted in figure 6, there is a strong continuation and expansion in US direct investment in Asia. This significant increase was a response to the previously indicated devaluation of the Chinese yuan.

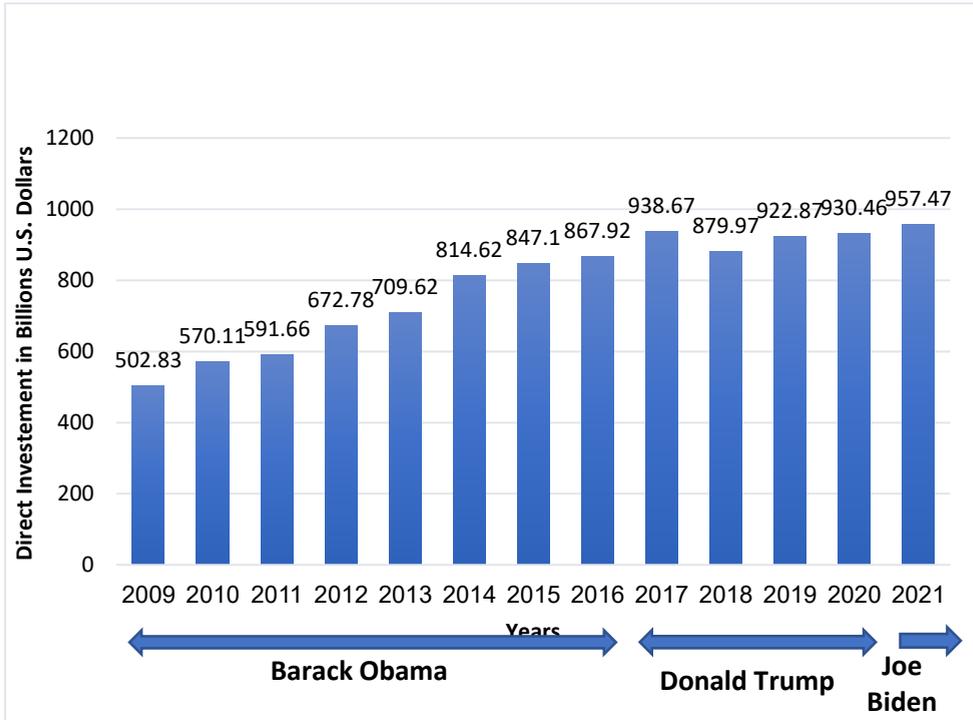


Figure 6 Direct Investment position of the United States in Asia Pacific from 2009 to 2021. Source: Statista Research Department (Statista, 2022).

In other words, regardless of the change in administrations, there remains a strong interest in US investment in the Indo-Pacific region, particularly in 2017 under the Trump administration. Accordingly, it can be said that a clear strategy to ensuring consistency in direct investment in Asia-Pacific has been established (Statista, 2022).

Arms Sales

Formal US allies and close ties with other states emerged as a result of the US determination to provide resources public services to the defence of its allies. During fiscal years 2014 through 2018, the US Department of Defence (DOD) acquired 3,038 requests for Foreign Military Sales (FMS) availability and price data from 93 countries spanning six geographic regions. It is recognized that Indopacom (US Indo-Pacific Command) has the biggest requirement to counteract China's dominance and increase security. In other words, the US gives weaponry to the Indo-Pacific region to safeguard its allies from expanding Chinese influence and military power. According to Statista (2015-2019), it is noticed that 3 of the top 5 USA's biggest arms export partners are members of the Indo-pacific region; Australia ranks

second after Saudi Arabia as the US largest arms export partner, while South Korea ranks fourth and Japan comes in fifth. (Armstrong, 2020).

Conclusion

The pivot to Asia plan was undertaken by the Obama administration in 2011 in reaction to China's economic and military expansion, which represents a substantial structural change. This policy has resulted in a strategic rebalance and a shift in the US' Middle East focus. The pivot enabled the US to extend its footprint in the Indo-Pacific and enhance its cooperation with regional partners. However, the fluctuating US orientation towards China from Obama to Biden, had paved the way for the paper to further analyze the influence of subjective interpretations of the three most recent US administrations in (a) how they perceived US interests and threats to such interests in the "Indo-Pacific" region, and (b) how these varying perceptions were translated into policy practices. After a thorough investigation of the three administrations, we can argue that the main reason for the US rebalancing toward the Indo-Pacific region is the rise of China and the aim to contain it and maintain US influence and dominance in the region.

The employment of the agent-oriented approach showed that the three most recent administrations developed their own perceptions toward the wider region including threats, interests, allies and enemies toward China in particular. The application of the securitization approach and discursive analysis of their speeches showed a pattern of continuity of US perceptions; however, the translation of these perceptions differed from one administration to another. Despite variations in their rhetoric, the three administrations consistently took the required measures to counter perceived challenges and advance their own objectives. US administrations, beginning with the Obama administration, seek to operate on numerous levels in this manner. On the political level, the US worked to deepen ties with longstanding allies and forge new alliances. Thus, the US was able to address the numerous security issues caused by China's expansion in the region. On the economic level and in order to maintain a strong presence in the region, the US wants to make deeper inroads into regional nations' economy through multilateral agreements, aid, trade, and investments, as well as by supplying allies with arms to offset the Chinese military threat.

The use of framing theory highlights how the discourse of the three administrations came to agree upon the most crucial threats and interests of

the US in the region. First, the two democratic administrations of Obama and Biden regarded multilateralism as crucial in their Indo-Pacific foreign policy to work with like-minded partners to counter-balance China's rise, whereas the republic administration of Trump believed that a "better deal" for the US could only be reached through bilateral accords. Second, Obama's strategic patience, Trump's strategic accountability, and Biden's policy of the middle ground were all distinct approaches to North Korean policy across the three administrations. Third, Obama adopted a cooperative stance toward China and the wider region, while Trump maintained the same ideals while adopting a more confrontational stance, as he recognized the need to commence a trade war with China in response to its disruptive actions. But Biden, though, concentrated on mending relationships with his Pacific allies that had been damaged by the Trump administration by emphasizing economic cooperation, as Obama had done, while simultaneously attempting to contain China's rise.

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