

Opening the Aperture

Advancing US Strategic Priorities in the Indo-Pacific Region

Gen Herbert J. “Hawk” Carlisle, USAF, Retired

Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed or implied in the Journal are those of the authors and should not be construed as carrying the official sanction of the Department of Defense, Air Force, Air Education and Training Command, Air University, or other agencies or departments of the US government. This article may be reproduced in whole or in part without permission. If it is reproduced, the Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs requests a courtesy line.

No doubt, North Korea puts on a great fireworks display. Yet, while Americans fixated on the volatile dictator rattling rockets on the Korean Peninsula, the rest of the Indo-Pacific region continued to transform at an increasingly breakneck pace. Public discourse on US defense strategy in Asia is outdated, reflecting a fixation on legacy threats, disputes, and commitments of the last century rather than the emerging threats and opportunities of this century. The renaming of US Pacific Command to US Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) provides the United States with an opportunity to expand the aperture of US grand strategy and to engage the region clear eyed. While the regional security map of the twentieth century prioritized Northeast Asia, the map of the twenty-first century demands strategic attention spotlight a wider landscape characterized by People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) hegemonic aspirations and a larger set of competing national interests. As the United States learns to look at Asian security through an Indo-Pacific lens, securing the American commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific will require focused attention on three issues: (1) denying the PRC’s assertion of control of the South China Sea, (2) leveraging Indo-Pacific economic integration to balance against Chinese economic power, and (3) integrating India as a regional security partner.

To understand the worrisome gaps in the national discussion of US defense strategy in the Indo-Pacific region, consider the simple difference between the media attention devoted to North Korea’s recent provocations against the United States and its allies and the attention directed to the PRC’s aggressive actions in the South China Sea. North Korea and the PRC both engaged in a series of provocative military actions throughout 2017. Between Inauguration Day 2017 and New Year’s Eve 2017, *The New York Times*, the daily foreign affairs news source of choice for Washington policy elites, published 1,179 articles containing the words “North Korea nuclear” versus 377 articles containing the words “South China Sea.” When on 9 August 2017, North Korea announced its intent to fire four test missiles close to the US territory of Guam, *The New York Times* published 91 articles con-

taining “North Korea nuclear” during the following week. When on 10 August 2017, Chinese naval vessels confronted US naval ships conducting freedom-of-navigation patrols in the South China Sea, the next week saw *The New York Times* publish a mere 8 articles containing “South China Sea.” By these measures, hostile military contact between the world’s most consequential powers was less newsworthy than the test launch of 1960s rocket technology.

What made this discrepancy puzzling is that there is no particular reason to believe the North Korea situation warranted such a large prioritization in coverage over the South China Sea disputes. Fear of war between the United States and North Korea is justified but remains unlikely, especially taken in context of North Korea’s history of hundreds of provocations against the United States and its allies in Northeast Asia since the end of the Korean War. Meanwhile, the PRC’s unprecedented aggressive territorial control measures in the South China Sea repeatedly brought opposing military forces into close contact. Strategically, the attention the United States pays to North Korean tensions must be balanced with the need to take effective action to counter the PRC in the South China Sea.

Enduring Twentieth-Century Legacy on US Indo-Pacific Grand Strategy

One reason North Korea receives disproportionate attention in the public discourse on US defense strategy in the Indo-Pacific is because policy makers failed to evolve twentieth-century notions of US security interests in the region in conjunction with the changing strategic landscape. Post-World War II, US strategic objectives in the Indo-Pacific included protecting allies, containing authoritarian communism, maintaining regional stability, and supporting free trade. As the dominant military power in the Indo-Pacific, the United States guaranteed security for its allies by permanently forward basing forces in Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the Philippines and conducting regular exercises with other allies in the region. The United States also offered security guarantees to Taiwan to help maintain its independence from the PRC. The large US security umbrella in the Indo-Pacific helped to deter communist expansion, and, by assuring allies of their protection, helped to demilitarize and stabilize the region. The United States supplemented its military presence in the Indo-Pacific with economic and diplomatic power, developing trade and political relationships often leveraged to promote liberal economic institutions and to encourage anti-communist resistance. US economic and security guarantees created conditions for non-aligned nations to coex-

ist peacefully as well. This effective strategy built the foundation for peace and economic success for many, if not most, Indo-Pacific nations through the end of the twentieth century.

The changing political structures and socio-economic landscape of the region did little to change US Indo-Pacific regional security strategy. The basing and posture of US forces in the Indo-Pacific continue to prioritize the deterrence and assurance needs of US allies in the northeast. When the fall of the Soviet Union and the rocky *détente* between the United States and the PRC reduced the overall threat to allies and interests in the Indo-Pacific, the United States retained focus on the communist regimes of North Korea and mainland China. The general peace and prosperity of Indo-Pacific during the post-Cold War era enabled the United States to rely heavily on economic and diplomatic engagement to achieve its interests in the rest of the region.

The PRC's post-Cold War growth disrupted the old security order in the Indo-Pacific, in no small measure by selectively flouting and exploiting international rules. China's turn from impoverished communism to an increasingly prosperous state-managed capitalism enabled its rise from ranking 11th in gross domestic product (GDP) among nations in 1980 to second in 2017, transforming it into a global power. Following an import substitution strategy built on cheap labor copying and manufacturing foreign innovations, the PRC reinvested the earnings from its export-driven economic growth to enhance its economic, diplomatic, and military power. China now challenges the United States as the Indo-Pacific's dominant influence on regional affairs. While the PRC's power grows, American influence in the Indo-Pacific declines, straining under the weight of America's commitments in the Middle East and throughout the world. According to the World Bank, China and the United States are now roughly equal as destinations for Indo-Pacific exports; however, China exports double the amount of goods and services to other Indo-Pacific countries. China has seven free trade agreements with Indo-Pacific partners, under implementation or signed, while the United States has three. Finally, despite China's heavy investments in expanding and modernizing its armed forces, US military deployments to the Indo-Pacific region have roughly stayed the same for the last two decades.

Opening the Aperture of US Grand Strategy in the Indo-Pacific

This challenge from China calls for the United States to “open the aperture” of its grand strategy. Doing so will allow the United States to get a much bigger pic-

ture and better understanding of the entire region. The big picture in the Indo-Pacific region shows current US engagement—economic, diplomatic, and military—is insufficient to secure American objectives against China’s hegemonic push for regional power.

Department of Defense (DOD) leaders show strong signs of recognizing how the United States must respond to this challenge. In May 2018, the DOD re-named US Pacific Command (USPACOM) as US Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM). At a ceremony announcing the change, Secretary of Defense James Mattis remarked that the name change recognized the importance of America’s allies and relationships with countries bordering the Indian Ocean as well as the Pacific Ocean to maintaining regional stability and achieving a shared vision of an Indo-Pacific region of “many belts and many roads,” countering the PRC’s One Belt, One Road Initiative.

Opening the aperture of US Indo-Pacific grand strategy requires more than a name change. It also requires changes to America’s strategic priorities. If, as the 2018 National Defense Strategy declares, the United States has entered an “era of great power competition,” then the United States should engage in a full-spectrum, whole-of-government competition against the PRC’s ambitions for Indo-Pacific dominance. Too often, US strategic priorities in the Indo-Pacific region seem narrowly constructed around the specific geography of Northeast Asia and around traditional military and diplomatic solutions. The big picture of the Indo-Pacific balance of power strongly suggests that America’s most important priorities encompass the region’s full geography and have solutions that include, but certainly are not limited to, traditional military and diplomatic approaches. As mentioned earlier, three issues stand-out as most deserving of immediate prioritization: (1) control of the South China Sea; (2) enhanced US economic integration in the Indo-Pacific; and (3) the US–India regional security partnership.

Control of the South China Sea

Disputes over control of the South China Sea are a simmering crisis of regional and global importance. Since 2009, China has unilaterally, and without international legal support, claimed sovereign rights over most of the South China Sea, invoking the 1947 “nine-dash line” boundary and recently increasing the claim to the “ten-dashed line,” placing at risk the core American interest of free and open navigation of Indo-Pacific waters. The PRC’s militarized campaign of land recla-

mation, involving hundreds of islands and atolls in the South China Sea, is also triggering multiple disputes between China and its Southeast Asian neighbors, in particular, Vietnam and the Philippines.

Many of the disputes center on the Spratly Islands, the largest of the South China Sea's island groups. The Spratly's scattered geography and shallow waters once made them dangerous territory for ships, but British and American naval mapping of sea lanes allowed the South China Sea to evolve into a major international transshipment corridor. A nation with control of the Spratly's sea lanes could strangle international commerce. Through a series of invasive military measures, China positioned itself to gain such control. For example, in 2014, it prevented the Philippines from resupplying a detachment of their marines based in the southern zone of the Spratly. Thus, the PRC has demonstrated the capability, capacity, and will to execute naval blockade operations through a key maritime chokepoint.

Preventing China from impeding shipping in the Spratly should be among America's top strategic priorities because that strategic line of communication enables global commerce. The South China Sea has become a vital hub of the global economy. Huge growth in global trade volumes with China and Southeast Asia have driven a corresponding surge in the shipping volumes that pass through the South China Sea. Nearly half of all global oil tanker traffic passes through the South China Sea (five times greater than the volume of traffic passing through the Panama Canal). Several of the world's largest shipping ports are located close to the South China Sea. Although the PRC is unlikely to disrupt freedom of navigation casually, because it normally benefits from it, during a future regional conflict, its control of an important economic chokepoint would provide a significant strategic advantage. However, shipping is not the only economic priority in the South China Sea.

A free and open South China Sea is also important to all Southeast Asia nations because of the potential economic benefits from the region's natural resources. The South China Sea provides a rich source of fossil energy resources and fisheries. Competition for these resources has driven multiple disputes in the region. For instance, Chinese oil companies have competed with a joint Vietnamese–Indian project to develop oil and gas resources in the South China Sea. Most recently, in 2014 Chinese security ships used water cannons to deter a Vietnamese flotilla that tried to sail into Chinese oil drilling claims in the Paracel Islands. Additionally, a decline of fisheries' production in the South China Sea has led to territorial dis-

putes, such as the 2012 crisis that ensued after the Philippine Navy detained eight Chinese fishing craft in the Scarborough Shoal. The PRC appears willing and able to use its military and economic strength to ensure it controls a disproportionate share of the natural resources in the South China Sea.

As a part of an Indo-Pacific grand strategy, the United States must develop policies and capabilities to deter and, if necessary, overcome Chinese actions to control the South China Sea. The United States should continue to prioritize freedom of navigation for all nations and create conditions for regional and international forums to determine resource allocation. The PRC's current forces in the South China Sea are increasingly formidable. Incoming USINDOPACOM commander Adm Philip Davidson stated China is now capable of "overwhelming" any other island claimants in the South China Sea and is capable of controlling access to and use of the shipping lanes. To effectively counter Chinese forces, the United States will need to prioritize a permanent and rotating military presence in the region.



US Navy Adm Philip S. Davidson, left, shakes hands with Navy Adm Harry B. Harris during the change-of-command ceremony in which Davidson assumed command of US Indo-Pacific Command at Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam, Hawaii, 30 May 2018. Air Force photo by Airman 1st Class Nathan H. Barbour.



EODMU 5, Australian and US forces train together on Guam. Explosive Ordnance Disposal Technician 3rd Class Devin Rodriquez, right, looks on as Senior Chief Explosive Ordnance Disposal Technician Luigi Mendoza, center, and an Australian Army soldier coordinate during the unit-level training event Pyrocrab. Held biennially, Pyrocrab focuses on strengthening relationships and enhancing interoperability between the US Navy and Australian forces. EODMU-5 is assigned to commander, Task Force 75, the primary expeditionary task force responsible for the planning and execution of coastal riverine operations, explosive ordnance disposal, diving engineering and construction, and underwater construction in the US 7th Fleet area of operations. US Navy Photo by Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Kryzentia Richards.

Only by presenting a credible military deterrent will US leaders be able to insist on freedom of navigation and independent adjudication of Chinese territorial claims.

The United States must also harness the power of alliances and partnerships to enlist participation in regional cooperative security arrangements that help to counter Chinese forces. US naval forces regularly conduct freedom of navigation operations (FONOPS), essentially sea patrols through disputed waters, in the South China Sea, to “exercise and assert [US] navigation and overflight rights and freedoms on a worldwide basis in a manner that is consistent with the balance of interests reflected in the Law of the Sea (LOS) Convention.” The United States works with traditional naval allies such as Japan, Australia, the United Kingdom, and France in FONOPS but needs to increase the involvement of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries in these patrols to enhance the scale and consistency of such operations. Another example of the kind of cooperative engagement that will play an important role in the Indo-Pacific is the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, also known as “the Quad.” Reconvened in November 2017 after a 10-year hiatus, the Quad is an

informal gathering of defense officials from the United States, Japan, Australia, and India to discuss Indo-Pacific security issues.

Trade Partnerships & the Role of Economic Integration in the Indo-Pacific

Trade relationships are strategically important for maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific region. Once an afterthought, the economies of Southeast Asia are among the world's fastest-growing and are important to global production networks. However, the massive Chinese economy increasingly dominates regional trade and capital flows. As a result, many of the region's economies are increasingly connected to the Chinese economy and, therefore, sensitive to Chinese policy preferences. These countries are increasingly pulled into China's economic and political orbit, becoming outlets for Chinese goods, services, capital, and policies. They could provide the PRC with important diplomatic and military backing for its regional hegemonic goals.

The United States should counteract Chinese economic and political influence by developing trade partnerships with Southeast Asian economies. Trade partnerships also help improve US economic competitiveness against China. Negotiated trade agreements can help to improve conditions under which a country's corporations conduct business, by reducing barriers to market access, affirming intellectual property rights, and equalizing labor and environmental standards. Without such agreements in place, US companies may operate at a disadvantage in comparison with native competitors or competitors from countries with their own trade agreements.

The controversy over the multilateral Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade agreement should not dissuade US policy makers from negotiating future trade partnerships in Southeast Asia and other parts of the Indo-Pacific. In fact, America's withdrawal from the TPP should do the opposite. The TPP attempted to establish an encompassing trade regime linking key economies of Southeast Asia and Oceania with the North American free trade zone. Some in the United States criticized the TPP for potentially weakening domestic investment by US companies and creating another back door for Chinese products to flood the American market. These potential pitfalls cannot be overlooked. However, many economic and foreign affairs experts extolled the TPP benefits as necessary to ensure the long-term competitiveness of US companies operating in the Indo-Pacific, and as an important tool for building support for economic liberalism. By pulling out of TPP, the United States lost an opportunity to lead the region economically, while simultaneously missing an opportunity to provide a viable alternative to a China-centric regional economic

system. Despite the US withdrawal, the other 11 participant countries, comprising nearly 16 percent of worldwide economic production, renegotiated and authorized the agreement as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership. Notwithstanding any merits of withdrawing from the negotiations, the United States' absence sacrificed an opportunity to strengthen its regional partnerships outside of defense relationships. It also limited economic interdependence between the United States and those nations, weakening the potential foundation of a transformational whole-of-government US strategy for the region. Finally, it provided China an opening to raise the profile of its own multilateral regional trade partnership strategy. The United States must work diligently to build economic and trade cooperation with the nations of the Indo-Pacific.


India and the Indo-Pacific's Future Balance of Power

Skepticism of US reliability and intensions in the region may damage America's relationship with the nation whose impact in the region will only increase over the next decade. The bulk of the DOD's justification for renaming USINDOPACOM recognized the deep linkages between India and the future of Pacific Rim affairs. India's integration into regional economic and security partnerships has the potential to dramatically shift the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific region. Expected to become the world's most populous country by 2024 and currently the world's sixth largest economy, India exemplifies the traits of a rising global economic and military power. India's economy is strongly interdependent with the rest of the Indo-Pacific, exporting nearly 23 percent of the goods imported into East Asian and Pacific countries, while importing over 38 percent of the goods exported by those countries. Home to one of the world's largest armed forces and defense budgets, India is expanding its military, announcing in February 2018 plans to increase defense spending by nearly 8 percent for the 2018–2019 fiscal year.

For the United States, India is attractive as a potential security ally and trading partner. Not only does India have the world's second-largest military, it is also one of the relatively few nations that possesses an aircraft carrier, giving it the ability to project military power at regional distances and scales. In recognition of its strategic importance, in 2016 the United States conferred "Major Defense Partner" status on India. Although India has a post-colonial tradition of neutrality between competing great powers, its current political leadership has expressed interest in participating in regional cooperative security ventures.

The United States and India share a strategic imperative to hedge against Chinese regional dominance. India fought a minor war against China in 1962, and its subsequent relationship with China has been tense. For example, China blocked India's ambitions to join the UN Security Council, and India has resisted China's One Belt, One Road Initiative. More recently, Chinese and Indian armed forces engaged in a months-long standoff in 2017, triggered by Chinese road-building in the Bhutanese territory of Doklam near the Chinese-Indian Border. Most troublesome for India, China forged a security partnership with Pakistan, India's bitter rival, even announcing in late 2017 plans to construct a strategic offshore naval base in Pakistan. Therefore, the current relationship between the countries is characterized by deep suspicion and conflict. Through more intensive engagement with India, the United States might forge a partnership that could transform grand strategy in the region.

Conclusion

The United States can no longer afford to have a grand strategy for the Indo-Pacific based primarily on legacy defense priorities and commitments. To be sure, traditional issues such as the defense of Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan are and will remain important areas of strategic interest. However, in a rapidly evolving Asian economic, political, and security landscape, the United States must widen its strategic aperture to recognize and respond to changing regional dynamics. The re-naming of US Pacific Command as US Indo-Pacific Command begins to implement strategic changes necessary if the United States intends to achieve its vision of "free and open" access to the Asian markets. The United States must open the aperture of its strategy in Asia to recognize and engage other, lesser known, but strategically important issues. Maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific region against an increasingly powerful China will require a combination of deterrence and assurance measures. As the PRC tries to assert control over the South China Sea, the United States must invest in the capabilities and capacity sufficient to deter aggression. Developing more and better trade partnerships with the emerging economies of the Indo-Pacific is an important step in limiting the PRC's economic and diplomatic influence. Finally, developing a robust partnership with India can help counter Chinese hegemonic aspirations by fundamentally altering the region's balance of power. 

Notes

1. James N. Mattis, “Remarks at U.S. Indo-Pacific Change of Command Ceremony” (speech transcript, US Department of Defense, 30 May 2018), <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/1535689/remarks-at-us-indo-pacific-command-change-of-command-ceremony/>. The One Belt, One Road Initiative is a push by the PRC to take a more prominent role in global affairs through the establishment of a China-centric trading network.

2. US Department of State, “Maritime Security and Navigation,” website, n.d., <https://www.state.gov/e/oes/ocns/opa/maritimesecurity/>.

3. Ankit Panda, “US Implementation of ‘Major Defense Partner’ Perks for India Underway,” *Diplomat* (website), 14 April 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/04/us-implementation-of-major-defense-partner-perks-for-india-underway/>



Herbert J. “Hawk” Carlisle

Gen Herbert J. “Hawk” Carlisle, USAF, retired, is president and chief executive officer of the National Defense Industrial Association. General Carlisle came to NDIA after a 39-year career in the Air Force, from which he retired as a four-star general in March 2017. His last assignment was as commander, Air Combat Command at Langley Air Force Base in Virginia. Before that, Carlisle was the commander of Pacific Air Forces; the air component commander for US Pacific Command; and executive director of Pacific Air Combat Operations staff, Joint Base Pearl Harbor, Hawaii.

Carlisle served in various operational and staff assignments throughout the Air Force and commanded a fighter squadron, an operations group, two wings, and a numbered air force. He was a joint service officer and served as chief of air operations, US Central Command Forward in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. During that time, he participated in Operation Restore Hope in Somalia. He also participated in Operation Provide Comfort in Turkey and Operation Noble Eagle, which continues.

Carlisle served as director of operational planning, policy, and strategy; deputy chief of staff for air, space, and information operations, plans, and requirements; and twice in the plans and programs directorate. He also served as deputy director and later director of legislative liaison at the Office of the Secretary of the Air Force. He is a command pilot with more than 3,600 flying hours in the AT-38, YF-110, YF-113, T-38, F-15A/B/C/D, and C-17A.

Carlisle graduated from the US Air Force Academy in 1978 with a bachelor of science degree in mathematics. He received a master’s degree in business administration in 1988 from Golden Gate University of San Francisco. He completed studies at the Squadron Officer School, the F-15 Fighter Weapons Instructor Course, Air Command and Staff College, Armed Forces Staff College, and Army War College. He also studied national security management at Syracuse University, international relations at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and national and international security at George Washington University.