

A photograph of the USS Barry (DDG 52) underway. The ship's complex superstructure, featuring various radar masts and missile launchers, is visible against a blue sky with scattered white clouds. The dark blue ocean stretches to the horizon. In the foreground, parts of the ship's deck, including railings and equipment, are visible.

# Reimagining an Affirmative Order for the Indo-Pacific

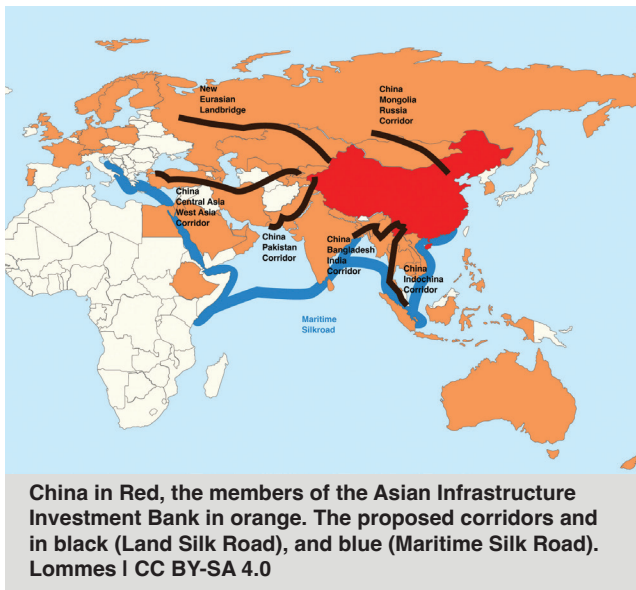
By Nathan K. Finney, PhD

The Arleigh-Burke class guided-missile destroyer USS Barry (DDG 52) conducts underway operations in the South China Sea near the Parcel Islands, April 28, 2020. Barry is forward-deployed to the U.S. 7th Fleet area of operations in support of security and stability in the Indo-Pacific region. | U.S. Navy photo by Ensign Samuel | public domain



*The views presented in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Department of Defense, United States Indo-Pacific Command, or the U.S. Army.*

The Indo-Pacific region is the primary theater of geopolitical and economic rivalry in the 21st Century, presenting both unprecedented challenges and opportunities for the United States. Analysis has treated the balance of power between the United States and the People's Republic of China as a daily scorecard. However, because U.S.-China competition is multi-faceted and complex, and because the results will have global impacts, the situation demands both clear-eyed analysis of the current strategic context, as well as bold thinking about the future. This essay examines the United States' strategic position in the Indo-Pacific, analyzing its objectives and actions over the last twenty years, and proposes a more positive and aspirational vision for American leadership in the region – one that focuses on tools that complement military activities, as well as increase the stability and prosperity of the Indo-Pacific by competing in areas that are advantageous to the U.S., our allies, and partners. The stakes could not be higher. The decisions made in the coming years will fundamentally shape the international system for generations to come.



Over the past two decades, the United States attempted to maintain its post-Second World War role as the predominant force securing stability and prosperity for all nations in the Indo-Pacific. Doing so required continual adaptation to China's rising influence, military capability, and assertiveness against its neighbors. However, most adjustments to counter Chinese adversarial actions were reactive, a continuity across presidential administrations. Most policy analysts and academics argue that previous U.S. approaches focused more on countering emerging threats than articulating a compelling alternative vision for regional order.<sup>1</sup> The United States and its allies and partners largely focused on the status quo, using the benefits many nations saw from American hegemony as the reason it should continue. However, this current vision – one of status quo and an ideal approach already achieved – fails to speak to many in the region, and the world, who feel left out of the present regional and international order.<sup>2</sup>

**“In the past twenty years America’s Indo-Pacific strategy shifted, driven largely by China’s dramatically increasing economic power and military modernization.”**

Reimagining a new, more affirmative multilateral relationship structure is required to compete more effectively against China's compelling, but ultimately deceptive vision of regional security and its bilateral relationships.<sup>3</sup>

## TWO DECADES OF STRATEGIC EVOLUTION

In the past twenty years America's Indo-Pacific strategy shifted, driven largely by China's dramatically increasing economic power and military modernization.<sup>4</sup> In the early 2000s, following the September 11 attacks, U.S. attention was diverted to counterterrorism operations in the Middle East and South Asia. This strategic

distraction created space for China to expand its influence throughout the region, particularly through economic initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative and military modernization efforts focused on anti-access and area denial capabilities.<sup>5</sup>

## “The second Trump administration appears to be returning to the previous approach of using economic incentives and disincentives to drive security arrangements.”

The Obama administration’s “Pivot to Asia” marked an important recognition of the Indo-Pacific’s centrality to American interests, but implementation suffered due to continued commitments elsewhere and insufficient resource allocation.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, Obama was plagued by recurring crises in the Middle East, which drew attention and resources. By the end of the administration, little to no “pivot” had occurred beyond aspirational policy. The first Trump administration identified the challenge of Chinese revisionism but focused on confrontation despite strategy documents that offered a more nuanced approach.<sup>7</sup> The Biden administration set

forth an approach to “Invest, Align, Compete” with China, designed to demonstrate to other nations that the U.S. model was the most effective for all nations while also recognizing China as the “most serious long-term challenge to the international order.”<sup>8</sup> This approach did not alter the trends in the region, with structural issues between the U.S. and China continuing to deteriorate.

For all of these presidents, the underlying economic aspects of the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy has been particularly challenging. The decision to withdraw from the Trans-Pacific Partnership at the beginning of the first Trump administration, a policy the U.S. political class supported across the spectrum, created a vacuum that China eagerly filled through initiatives like the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership. While the Biden administration attempted to recover ground through the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), this initiative lacked the market access provisions that regional partners most desire.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, Biden’s submarine technology partnership between the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia lacked tangible and near-term improvement to regional security.

The second Trump administration appears to be returning to the previous approach of using economic incentives and disincentives to drive security arrangements.<sup>10</sup> Both confirmed and nominated political appointees have clear views on the region and the competition between the U.S. and China. Secretary of State Marco Rubio noted in his confirmation hearing that China has “ignored all its obligations and responsibilities. Instead, they have lied, cheated, hacked, and stolen their way to global superpower status at our expense.”<sup>11</sup> Rubio continued, laying out that, “If we don’t change course, we are going to live in a world where much of what matters to us on a daily basis from our security to our health will be dependent on whether the Chinese allow us to have it or not.”<sup>12</sup> Secretary of Defense Peter Hegseth took a similar line, stating that China is building its military to



President Donald J. Trump, joined by Vice President Mike Pence, United States Trade Representative Ambassador Robert Lighthizer and Cabinet members, welcomes Chinese Vice Premier Liu He Thursday, Jan. 31, 2019, to the Oval Office of the White House, following two-days of U.S.—China trade talk. | Official White House Photo by Tia Dufour | public domain





A U.S. Navy MH-60S Sea Hawk helicopter lands on the flight deck of the Independence-variant littoral combat ship USS Omaha (LCS 12) during Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT) Brunei 2024, Nov. 24. This year marks the 30th iteration of CARAT, a multinational exercise series designed to enhance U.S. and partner navies' abilities to operate together in response to maritime security challenges in the Indo-Pacific region. | U.S. Navy COMDESRON7 by Petty Officer 2nd Class Sean Lynch | public domain

specifically defeat the United States and China is “rushing to modernize and build arsenals larger than ours. We need to match threats to capabilities, and the systems we elevate will be tied to whether those capabilities are needed based on the adversaries we face.”<sup>13</sup>

The most cohesive approach comes from Elbridge Colby, the recently confirmed Undersecretary of Defense for Policy. In *Strategy of Denial*, Colby provides a desired approach regarding China and the strategic clarity the U.S. requires globally.<sup>14</sup> This approach employs a balance of power approach, recruiting an anti-hegemonic coalition in the Indo-Pacific region whose combined power could defeat China, thereby deterring them from conducting any military actions that run counter to U.S. interests. Colby specifically addresses the security dilemma the United States faces regarding Taiwan, but his approach of bolstering bilateral and trilateral security agreements across Asia improves deterrence against China across the Indo-Pacific.

### **AN ASPIRATIONAL VISION: REIMAGINING AMERICAN LEADERSHIP**

Recognizing this history, where the current U.S.-China relationship stands, and the attendant

effects on U.S. security and global stability, we should consider how the United States can develop and articulate a more positive, aspirational, and compelling vision for the Indo-Pacific region. This can be done by using Colby’s strategy of denial, while also drawing from other China experts like Elizabeth Economy, who simultaneously has worked in and out of government on revitalizing American leadership in the region. This vision should move beyond the narrow focus on military competition to encompass economic prosperity, technological innovation, and shared democratic values. As Economy argues, American leadership must be reimagined for an era of strategic competition that extends far beyond traditional security concerns.<sup>15</sup>

A forward-looking vision should shift from preserving the status quo international order to a regional order that protects sovereignty, self-determination, and freedom from coercive actions by larger powers, but also addresses where the current order falls short for many peoples and nations. The U.S. should recognize that China’s narrative is compelling to much of the world because the status quo is insufficient for many peoples and their governments. Military and



diplomatic power must underpin this new order, creating stability and predictability through a coalition countering China, while also deterring nations like China and Russia from forcing their revisionist and revanchist desires on their neighbors. However, such stability cannot be created by military balancing and diplomatic efforts alone. It must also include a key component currently under resourced or employed in our foreign policy and regional strategy – the economic instrument of power.

Therefore, the cornerstone of a new vision should be a comprehensive economic element that addresses regional desires for growth and development while promoting high standards and innovation. This requires moving beyond the limited scope of IPEF to create a more inclusive economic architecture. The United States should establish a new digital trade framework built along the same anti-hegemonic coalition lines that address emerging technologies, data governance, and cybersecurity. This framework would set standards for the digital economy of the future, ease out China's predatory interests, and ensure that technological development aligns with American interests and values.<sup>16</sup>

Technological leadership represents perhaps the most crucial element of a regional vision. As artificial intelligence, quantum computing, blockchain/proof of work, and biotechnology reshape the global economy, the United States must lead in establishing frameworks for their development and deployment. This requires not only domestic investment in research and development, but also close cooperation with regional partners to ensure interoperability and shared standards. Such cooperation could include the U.S. Department of Commerce incentivizing private companies to invest and co-produce in key sectors, creating multilateral working groups to pursue shared standards and protocols, and joint aid programs to develop more tech-savvy workforces in partner nations. By working with allies of an anti-hegemonic coalition to create trusted networks for technological innovation, we can ensure that emerging technologies enhance U.S. and partner security and prosperity.<sup>17</sup>

Infrastructure development represents another crucial opportunity for American leadership. Through partnerships with allies like Japan, South Korea, and Australia, the United States can offer high-quality infrastructure investments that





Two Philippine Air Force FA-50 Fighting Eagles fly alongside two U.S. Air Force F-15C Eagles over the South China Sea, Nov. 21, 2023. Bilateral training and cooperation with the Philippine Air Force enhances the mutual readiness required to defend security, prosperity, and peace throughout the Indo-Pacific region. | Airman 1st Class Alexis Redin | public domain

provide a compelling alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative. This includes projects that secure possible dual-use military infrastructure, as well as sustainable infrastructure, digital connectivity, and clean energy projects. These investments would demonstrate American commitment to regional development while addressing critical needs for sustainable growth.<sup>18</sup> Likewise, a counter to the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIB), such as a federal industrial investment bank, would provide a welcome relief from China's dominance in regional capital investments. Such an approach could help the U.S. and its allies strategically compete with China in critical sectors, leverage private capital, and provide better long-term investments.<sup>19</sup>

In addition to economic aspects of the Indo-Pacific, security issues must also be addressed. Enhanced domain awareness, support for state capacity building, and multilateral cooperation on non-traditional security challenges would demonstrate American commitment to regional stability while respecting local autonomy. The security of the global commons and freedom of navigation at sea, in the air, and in space remain essential components of regional order, but our approach must evolve beyond traditional military frameworks. As Admiral Sam Paparo, Commander of U.S.

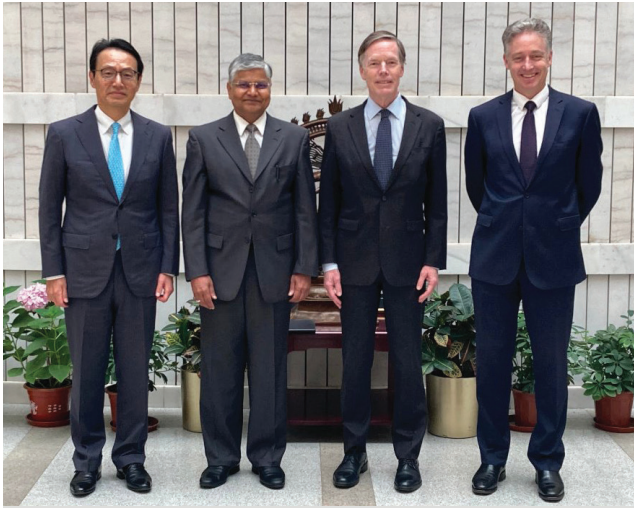
Indo-Pacific Command notes, "All of our allies and partners are under pressure. They are under coercion from actors such as the People's Republic of China. And frequently it is not just coercion in the military sphere, but across all levers of statecraft."<sup>20</sup>

The role of middle powers demands particular attention in a regional strategy. Countries like Vietnam, Indonesia, Australia, and the Philippines increasingly seek to balance their relationships with major powers while maintaining sovereignty and strategic autonomy. A new vision for the Indo-Pacific should offer these nations partnership opportunities that enhance their independence and prosperity while avoiding forced choices between the United States and China. Recent developments in U.S.-Vietnam relations, including expanded defense cooperation and economic partnerships, demonstrate the potential of this approach.<sup>21</sup>

This economic-heavy approach to a vision of the Indo-Pacific relies on a continually strengthening regional security architecture to maintain military deterrence against potential aggression. As Colby lines out in *Strategy of Denial*, this can be done through the solidifying of an anti-hegemonic coalition that creates security frameworks to address both traditional and non-traditional threats – all while incorporating the previously discussed non-military elements of a strategy.<sup>22</sup>



Camp H.M. Smith, Hawaii, United States, 03.24.2025. Senior Airman Madelyn Keech, Office of the Secretary of Defense Public Affairs. | public domain



Ambassador Burns and his Quad Ambassadorial colleagues from India, Japan and Australia standing together Ambassador Nicholas Burns: I had a productive meeting in Beijing with my Quad Ambassadorial colleagues from India, Japan and Australia—close friends + partners all for the development, stability, and prosperity of the Indo-Pacific. | Ambassador Nicholas Burns | public domain

Current multilateral and mini-lateral forums in the Indo-Pacific, such as the Quad, the Squad (U.S.-Japan-Australia-Philippines), the U.S.-Japan-South Korea Trilateral, and others could form the basis of this, helping to enhance regional capacity building, developing confidence-building measures to reduce the risk of military incidents, and deterring coercive action in the region.<sup>23</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The United States' position in the Indo-Pacific faces significant challenges, but also unprecedented opportunities to shape a regional order that advances both American interests and shared prosperity. While the strategy of denial articulated by Colby provides a foundation to create regional security, it must be complemented by an economic effort that provides a more comprehensive and positive vision for American leadership.

The rivalry with China will likely define international politics for decades to come, but this dynamic need not solely drive focus. By articulating and pursuing a positive vision for regional order for others to join, the bipolar focus can slip to the background, allowing the United States to create a holistic anti-hegemonic coalition an Indo-Pacific can demonstrate our sustained commitment, strategic patience, and most efficiently utilize our combined resources.

Success in this endeavor will require a degree of domestic consensus and strategic consistency that has often eluded American foreign policy. While certainly not immune from the dynamism of politics and policy today, the broad bipartisan recognition of the Indo-Pacific's importance and the challenge posed by China provides a foundation for consensus on many of the issues described here. By moving beyond purely military-focused approaches to develop a more comprehensive and attractive framework for regional order, the United States can maintain its leadership role while helping to shape a more stable and prosperous Indo-Pacific.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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