

# PERSPECTIVE

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## America's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy: A Vietnamese Perspective

*Le Hong Hiep\**

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Like most regional countries, Vietnam has much at stake with regards to what America's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) strategy means and how it unfolds in the future.
- The strategy is largely compatible with Vietnam's national interests, but so far Vietnam's responses to the strategy have been quite muted.
- While the Ministry of Foreign Affairs seems receptive to key tenets of the strategy, Vietnamese defence officials tend to adopt a more cautious approach.
- Due to the South China Sea disputes and its vulnerabilities in the face of a rising China, Vietnam is likely to support the strategy, albeit in a low-key manner.
- Vietnam may not want to commit itself to a rigid anti-China bloc or to adopt an openly confrontational approach in dealing with China, and instead seems to prefer a network of flexible security ties with the major powers and like-minded partners to manage China's rise.

*\* Le Hong Hiep is Fellow at ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute. The author would like to thank Daljit Singh and Lye Liang Fook for their useful comments on an earlier draft of the essay.*

## OVERVIEW OF THE US FREE AND OPEN INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY

The term “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy” has recently gained currency, especially after the Trump administration adopted it as America’s key Asia policy. Lying at the heart of the Indo-Pacific, Southeast Asian countries are understandably keen to work out what the new security concept means for the whole region as well as individual countries. Vietnam, which has been active in engaging ASEAN member states and key regional powers to shape its security environment, is especially interested in how the strategy unfolds.

The present essay analyzes the challenges and opportunities that the Trump administration’s Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy presents to Vietnam, Vietnam’s initial responses to the strategy, and how Vietnam may participate in its future evolution.

Coined by Indian strategist Gurpreet S. Khurana in a 2007 essay,<sup>1</sup> the term “Indo-Pacific” has been gradually embraced by some regional powers, most notably Japan, India, Australia, Indonesia and the United States, as the new overarching geo-strategic construct for the region. However, it was not until the concept was adopted by the Trump administration in its so-called Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy that it really gained currency and attracted renewed attention worldwide. In its national security and national defence strategies released in late 2017 and early 2018, the Trump administration affirmed “the Indo-Pacific as critical for America's continued stability, security, and prosperity”.<sup>2</sup> In his remarks at the 2018 Shangri La Dialogue in Singapore, US Defence Secretary James Mattis referred to America’s Indo-Pacific strategy as “a subset of our broader security strategy, codifying our principles as America continues to look West”. These “principles” are in fact not new. As John Lee argues, “at its heart, the Free and Open Indo-Pacific is a reaffirmation of the security and economic rules-based order which has existed since after the Second World War.”<sup>3</sup>

There have been debates about the exact geographical scope as well as the meaning of America’s “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” concept. On the geographical scope, however, in an address given at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, former U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson defined the Indo-Pacific as “the entire Indian Ocean, the Western Pacific and the nations that surround them”.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, at a press briefing in early April 2018, US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Alex N. Wong provided an explanation of the concept, giving insights into what the Trump administration means by a “free” and “open” Indo-Pacific.<sup>5</sup> The following table summarizes key attributes of the concept as explained by Wong:

Category	Attributes
Free	Free from coercion
	Good governance (fundamental rights, transparency and anti-corruption)
Open	Open sea lines of communication and airways
	Open logistics (infrastructure)
	Open investment
	Open trade (i.e. free, fair, and reciprocal trade)

Although the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) as defined by Wong can be seen as a reaffirmation of the post-WWII security and economic rules-based order, a number of its

features make it remarkably different from previous US regional strategies, including the so-called “rebalancing” strategy of the Obama administration.

*First*, the FOIP concept has extended the strategy’s geographical scope to include the Indian Ocean and to acknowledge the role that India can play in the evolving regional geo-strategic architecture. The inclusion of India is significant given New Delhi’s increasingly hardened stance on China as well as its important geographical location in the Indian Ocean region. *Second*, while the strategy is to some extent a “rebranding” of the Obama administration’s rebalancing strategy, its anti-China connotations seem to be more pronounced. For example, while the strategy’s emphasis on the freedom from coercion and the freedom of navigation and overflight reminds one of China’s behaviours in the South China Sea, the call for open logistics and infrastructure seems to challenge China’s Belt and Road Initiative that seeks to establish largely exclusive China-funded networks of infrastructure across the region. Similarly, US call for open investment and free, fair and reciprocal trade brings home the heated trade war between the two countries, in which Washington has accused Beijing of unfair trade and investment practices. *Third*, although how the US will operationalize the strategy remains unclear, the strengthening of strategic cooperation among the “Quad” (i.e. the US, Japan, Australia and India) may provide a vehicle for Washington to implement the strategy. In other words, if the Quad can boost the strategic cooperation among themselves in a substantive manner and Washington can leverage this mechanism to extend its strategic reach in the region, the FOIP strategy may prove to be more effective than the Obama administration’s rebalancing strategy which has been criticized for failing to prevent China from challenging international law and order and undermining Washington’s strategic preponderance in the region.<sup>6</sup>

Against this backdrop, the strategy has been interpreted by many China observers as a tool for the US and its allies to counteract China’s rise and its expanding influence in the Indo-Pacific region. Such an interpretation seems to have gained credence given the increasingly anti-China rhetoric and actions of the Trump administration in recent months, especially the US identification of China as a “strategic competitor”<sup>7</sup> and the escalating trade war that Washington is waging against Beijing. While agreeing on the general anti-China intentions of the strategy, Chinese strategists seem to have different views on the specific objectives of Washington. For example, Liang Fang, a professor at China’s National Defence University argues that the motive of the strategy is to prevent China’s Belt and Road Initiative from extending to the Indian Ocean and to build a new joint mechanism between the US and its allies and security partners in the Indo-Pacific region to counterbalance Beijing, thereby avoiding the risk of a head-on US-China confrontation.<sup>8</sup> Another Chinese scholar asserts that the strategy is a vehicle for the Trump administration to “outsource” its regional security responsibilities to its allies and security partners against the backdrop of its efforts to concentrate on domestic issues and security challenges in other parts of the world.<sup>9</sup> An op-ed in the *Global Times* even goes so far as to argue that the strategy’s aim is to “instigate China and India into long-term infighting”, to harness the rise of India, and to strengthen Washington’s control of the Indian Ocean.<sup>10</sup>

The FOIP strategy currently remains a vision rather than a concrete strategy with specific deliverables, implementation measures or timeline. Nevertheless, as the strategy will likely remain a linchpin in the US regional security policy in the years to come due to the continuing trend of intensifying US-China strategic rivalry, the current formative stage of the policy also

offers an opportunity for regional countries to engage with the US as well as its allies to shape the strategy in a way that best suits their national interests.

## **VIETNAM'S INITIAL RESPONSES TO THE STRATEGY**

Taken at face value, the US FOIP strategy as defined by Alex N. Wong is largely compatible with Vietnam's national interests. As a party to the South China Sea dispute which is vulnerable to China's growing power and increasing assertiveness, Vietnam will benefit from a regional rules-based order free from coercion. Similarly, the freedom of navigation and overflight as emphasized by the strategy is also what Vietnam seeks to promote as a rallying flag to mobilize international support for its struggle against China in the South China Sea. As a developing country that heavily relies on foreign trade and investment and seeks to upgrade its infrastructure systems, other economic attributes of the strategy, such as open infrastructures, open investment and open trade, also sit well with Vietnam's overall foreign policy. The only attribute that may cause some unease among Vietnamese leaders is its emphasis on good governance, especially the respect for fundamental rights. However, as the two countries have repeatedly pledged to respect each other's political systems and Washington has adopted a less critical position on Vietnam's human rights record in recent years, this attribute should not be a major source of concern for Vietnam given the potential strategic benefits that other attributes of the strategy may bring the country.

As such, one would expect Vietnam to view the strategy favourably. However, Hanoi's response to the strategy has so far been rather muted.

At the unofficial level, there has been little public discussion among Vietnamese strategists and scholars about the policy, its implications for Vietnam, as well as how Vietnam should respond to the policy. In a rare commentary on the strategy by a Vietnamese author, Pham Minh Thu, an official at the Department of Americas of the Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, opines that America's FOIP strategy represents "a new approach to an old strategy". The author asserts that the operationalization of the strategy and the Quad will face challenges due to India's unpreparedness, China's increasing power and influence, and America's questioned commitment to the region due to its strategic distractions elsewhere. The author therefore concludes that the success of the strategy will depend on America's leadership role as well as its reception among regional countries.<sup>11</sup>

At the official level, Vietnamese authorities have not made any public statement on the policy. As the policy is still in its formative stage and is seen by many observers as a tool for the US to "contain" China, it is not in Hanoi's interest to make a public statement on it. Moreover, Vietnamese mainstream strategists and foreign policy makers may not have arrived at a common understanding of the policy yet. Anecdotal evidence suggests that internal debates on the policy may be underway, and there seems to be different views on how Vietnam should respond to it.

During President Tran Dai Quang's visit to India in March 2018, the two countries issued a joint statement that indirectly lends support to the FOIP strategy by referring to some of its key elements. Specifically, the two sides "reiterated the importance of achieving a peaceful and prosperous Indo-Pacific region where sovereignty and international law, freedom of navigation

and overflight, sustainable development and a free, fair and open trade and investment system are respected.”<sup>12</sup>

In his speech on bilateral relations at the Nehru Museum Library on 4 March 2018, Mr Quang adopted the term “Indo-Asia-Pacific” to describe the “space of security and development comprising the Indian Ocean, Asia and the Pacific”. He also suggested that in order for the 21<sup>st</sup> century to become the “Indo-Asia-Pacific Century”, regional countries must:

- (i) share a common vision for an open and rules-based region, and a common interest in the maintenance of peace, stability, and inclusive prosperity;
- (ii) protect the freedom of navigation and unimpeded trade and not let the Indo-Asia-Pacific be balkanized into spheres of influence;
- (iii) build a common space for co-existence and development in the belief that the Indo-Asia-Pacific is vast enough for every country to flourish and prosper; and
- (iv) establish effective mechanisms to maintain peace, stability, and the rule of law, so as to ensure common security, prevent conflict and war, and effectively address security challenges.

President Quang also praised India's peaceful development as “an important and constructive factor to regional peace and stability”, and claimed that “with her vast potential and great contributions, India surely deserves a greater role in the Indo-Asia-Pacific region and the world”.<sup>13</sup>

Since the joint communiqué and Mr Quang’s speech were prepared by officials at the Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs,<sup>14</sup> it appears that the Ministry is receptive to the key tenets of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy and is supportive of India’s greater role in the regional security and economic architecture.

Meanwhile, at the 17<sup>th</sup> Shangri La Dialogue in Singapore in June 2018, the speech of Vietnamese Minister of Defence, General Ngo Xuan Lich, virtually made no mention of the FOIP strategy although discussion of the strategy dominated the Dialogue’s agenda, and the topic of the panel that General Lich was sitting on was “Shaping Asia’s evolving security order”.<sup>15</sup> To an extent, this is an indication of Vietnamese defence officials’ cautious approach, or their unpreparedness to discuss the strategy in public given its anti-China connotations. This is largely consistent with the Vietnamese defence establishment’s approach in dealing with China and other regional powers: trying not to generate a perception that Vietnam is siding with one power against another.

Like most regional countries, Vietnam is adopting a “wait and see” attitude and its future reactions to the strategy will depend on its own strategic calculations as well as the actual evolution of the strategy, which remains unclear at the moment. Vietnam’s cautious approach is also warranted by the fact that while the US is still struggling to formulate a credible and consistent strategic vision for the region, the other three members of the Quad may also have their own calculations, giving further reasons for other regional countries not to adopt a formal position on the strategy too early.

## **PROSPECTS OF VIETNAM'S ENGAGEMENT WITH THE FOIP STRATEGY**

Since the FOIP largely remains a vision rather than a concrete plan or an institutionalized mechanism, how the US will operationalize the strategy is a big open question for regional countries. It is likely that instead of institutionalizing the Quad or setting up a rigid security bloc to implement the strategy, Washington will seek to establish and strengthen a network of allies and security partners that will work together to defend the rules-based order and to constrain China's ambition to dominate the region. In this scenario, whether the strategy will be successful will depend on regional countries' willingness to team up with Washington to pursue these common goals.

Due to the South China Sea disputes and its vulnerabilities in the face of a rising China, Vietnam has interest in both working with the US and other security partners to uphold the regional rules-based order and to promote a regional security architecture that is not dominated by any single power. As such, Vietnam should be expected to endorse the FOIP strategy, albeit not necessarily publicly. Diplomatically, Vietnam may work with like-minded partners to insert references to key elements of the strategy into bilateral joint statements or joint communiqués of international meetings. Operationally, Vietnam is likely to continue deepening its strategic cooperation with the major powers, especially members of the Quad, to enhance collaborative security in the region and strengthen its bargaining position vis-à-vis China.

Like most other fellow ASEAN members, however, due to its extensive economic links with China, Vietnam may not want to commit itself to a rigid anti-China bloc or to adopt an openly confrontational approach in managing China's rise. Instead, Hanoi seems to prefer the existing soft network of security ties with the major powers and like-minded partners as long as China does not adopt an excessively coercive approach towards the South China Sea disputes, which may cause Hanoi to shift its strategic posture to a more assertive and confrontational one.

At the same time, although Vietnam and regional countries may play a certain role in the operationalization of the FOIP strategy, whether the strategy will be successful will mainly be determined by the US itself. Accordingly, Washington needs to demonstrate a coherent strategic vision for the region based on its strong leadership role and credible long-term commitments. It should also clarify the roles that it expects regional countries to play in the strategy, and provide a detailed action plan as a guide for interested countries to follow where possible. More importantly, this process should be conducted based on consultations between the US and its allies and partners. Any attempt by Washington to impose its will on regional countries, even in the name of an open and free rules-based regional order, will most likely be counter-productive.

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<sup>1</sup> Gurpreet S Khurana, "Security of Sea Lines: Prospects for India-Japan Cooperation," *Strategic Analysis* 31, no. 1 (2007).

<sup>2</sup> Remarks by Secretary Mattis at Plenary Session of the 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue, *US Department of Defense*, 2 June 2018, available at <<https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/1538599/remarks-by-secretary-mattis-at-plenary-session-of-the-2018-shangri-la-dialogue/>>

- <sup>3</sup> John Lee, “The ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific’ and Implications for ASEAN”, *Trends in Southeast Asia*, TRS13/18, (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2018), p.5.
- <sup>4</sup> “Defining Our Relationship with India for the Next Century: An Address by U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson”, *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 18 October 2017, available at <<https://www.csis.org/analysis/defining-our-relationship-india-next-century-address-us-secretary-state-rex-tillerson>>
- <sup>5</sup> “Briefing on The Indo-Pacific Strategy”, *US Department of State*, 2 April 2018, available at <<https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/04/280134.htm>>
- <sup>6</sup> See, for example, <<http://www.fsi.gov.ph/in-retrospect-assessing-obamas-asia-rebalancing-strategy/>>, <<https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/assessing-the-us-rebalance-to-the-asia-pacific/>>
- <sup>7</sup> Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military’s Competitive Edge, *US Department of Defense*, available at <<https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>>, p.1.
- <sup>8</sup> Liang Fang, “Indo-Pacific strategy will likely share the same fate as rebalance to Asia-Pacific”, *Global Times*, 3 December 2017, available at <<http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1078470.shtml>>
- <sup>9</sup> Private exchanges with the author and other researchers at ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, April 2018.
- <sup>10</sup> “Indo-Pacific strategy a trap by Washington”, *Global Times*, 31 May 2018, available at <<http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1105064.shtml>>
- <sup>11</sup> Pham Minh Thu, “‘Ấn Độ - Thái Bình Dương’: Cách tiếp cận mới cho chiến lược cũ”, *Thế giới & Việt Nam*, 3 February 2018, available at <<http://baoquocte.vn/an-do-thai-binh-duong-cach-tiep-can-moi-cho-chien-luoc-cu-65468.html>>
- <sup>12</sup> “India-Vietnam Joint Statement during State visit of President of Vietnam to India (March 03, 2018)”, *Ministry of External Affairs*, 3 March 2018, available at <<http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/29535/>>
- <sup>13</sup> “Full speech of Vietnam President Tran Dai Quang at Nehru Museum Library”, *The Economic Times*, 10 March 2018, available at <<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/articleshow/63212961.cms>>
- <sup>14</sup> Correspondence with Vietnamese officials, July 2018.
- <sup>15</sup> Full text of the speech is available at <<https://www.iiss.org/-/media/images/dialogues/sld/sld-2018/documents/ngo-xuan-lich-sld18.ashx>>

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