From the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific

Expanding Sino-U.S. Strategic Competition

Muhammad Saeed

Abstract: As a pivotal region, the Indo-Pacific has become the power center of world geopolitics. China is actively working on strengthening win-win cooperation and inter-connectivity within the region. Toward this goal, it has launched the “Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)” from which all regional countries can benefit. From the geopolitical perspective, however, the United States has perceived growing challenge from China and is determined to maintain global supremacy by continuing to increase its military presence in the Indo-Pacific and enhancing its quadrilateral strategic cooperation with Japan, Australia and India. After the Obama administration’s “Rebalancing” efforts to sustain U.S. leadership in the Asia-Pacific by strengthening political, security and economic ties with regional countries, the Trump administration puts much emphasis on the security aspect of its Indo-Pacific strategy under the “America First” doctrine, and this is proving to be rather unwelcome among regional countries. As a result, China’s regional influence is expected to continue

Muhammad Saeed is Researcher on international political economy and Asia-Pacific geopolitics at National Defense University Islamabad. His mailing address is: Flat No. 205, Almemar Tower E11/2, Islamabad. He can be also reached at mmsb1000@gmail.com.

expanding with the promotion of the BRI and other initiatives to enhance regional integration.

Keywords: Geopolitics; “Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)”; Rebalancing to Asia; Indo-Pacific, China-U.S. relations.

The United States has been the sole global superpower since the end of the Cold War. Yet entering into the 21st century, its hegemony is diminishing and the world is moving toward ever greater multi-polarity.¹ The Group of Eight (G8) has yielded its place to the Group of Twenty (G20) in global economic governance; emerging powers represented by the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) are claiming a bigger say in world politics; and many sub-regional or trans-regional cooperation institutions like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have become indispensable in maintaining peace, stability and economic growth of their respective regions. The resurgence of Russia under Putin and an increasingly confident China, in particular, represent a major shift of the global balance of power toward greater equilibrium between the Western camp and an emerging coalition of countries trying to push for a substantive reform of the established world order.

In general, a country's foreign policy is a function of its perception of, and reaction to, the internal and external environment in which its political goals are to be achieved. And usually, two factors are vital when evaluating a country's perception vis-à-vis its foreign policy: the first and foremost is the political culture within which it conducts its foreign policy behavior; and the second is the circumstances in which perception is made that matters to the foreign policy behavior.² According to Gideon Rose, both

¹Chalmers Johnson, *No Longer the “Lone” Superpower: Coming to Terms with China*, JPRI Working Paper No. 105 (Tokyo: Japan Policy Research Institute, March 2005), <http://www.jpri.org/publications/workingpapers/wp105.html>.

²Lee Branstetter, Britta Glennon, and Jensen Bradford, “The Importance of Doing Our BIT: The Economic Potential of a US-China Bilateral Investment Treaty,” in Adam S. Posen and Ha Jiming, eds., *US-China Cooperation in a Changing Global Economy* (Washington, D.C.: Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2017), pp. 92–104.

systematic pressures and domestic variables would influence foreign policy behavior.³

When analyzing Chinese foreign policy in the Asia-Pacific or, rather, the greater Indo-Pacific region, multiple domestic and foreign factors must be taken into account. With its growing demand for energy driven by rapid economic growth, China is projected to be world's largest energy importer. For China, a secure and sustained supply of energy is key to its national security. Therefore, free and safe maritime routes in the Pacific and Indian Oceans are lifelines for China's energy trade. Moreover, China's political and strategic culture, socialist ideology and nationalistic sentiment, as well as the leadership's perceptions are all significant factors that shape Chinese foreign policy. In recent years, deeper American engagements around the Strait of Malacca (nearly 80 percent of China-imported oil is shipped through the Strait. Hence the "Malacca Dilemma"), the South and East China Seas, and even the Indian Ocean constitute further structural constraints on Chinese foreign policy in the vast region.⁴

From the Chinese perspective, the United States intends to work more closely with regional allies and security partners like India to consolidate its strategic supremacy and, as a potential option, to block main choke points along regional sea lines of communication (SLOCs) to intimidate China. The United States, however, sees an ever more assertive China that aims to dominate the Asia-Pacific with continuing naval buildup and such economic initiatives as the "Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)" to lead regional economic development and inter-connectivity, which would ultimately exclude the U.S. from the region. Thus, a more confrontational strategy has been adopted — first on the notion of "Rebalancing to Asia" under President Obama, and then on "enhancing quadrilateral cooperation (the "Quad") in the Indo-Pacific" by the Trump administration, to balance China's rapid rise. Over the past few years, the Chinese leaders

³Gideon Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy," *World Politics*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (October 1998), pp. 144–172.

⁴Xu Ke, "The Challenges of Maritime Security Cooperation in the Straits of Malacca: Another Singapore Perspective," in Nicholas Tarling and Chen Xin, eds., *Maritime Security in East and Southeast Asia* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 85–106.

have reiterated that “The Pacific Ocean is big enough,”⁵ echoed in similar sincerity and optimism by key figures of the Obama administration.⁶ But now that the political contexts have changed dramatically in the United States under President Trump, as can be seen in the ever stronger anti-China sentiment among the U.S. strategic circle and the National Security Strategy Report launched in December 2017 that explicitly labeled China as a “rival,” the vast Indo-Pacific region is likely to witness more intensive strategic competition between China and the United States.

The Indo-Pacific: New Power Center of World Geopolitics

Many geopolitical analysts like Robert D. Kaplan predict that the United States will prioritize the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean as two important regions in the late 2010s and beyond.⁷ While the Mediterranean and the Middle East were regarded as the center of global power politics in the 20th century, the role of the Indian Ocean is becoming ever more prominent in the 21st century. As many observers see it, the Indian Ocean has been a center for geo-economic power struggle since the 1970s; and now, it would be a new center for geo-strategic and geopolitical competition among world powers. While China’s military budget has undergone a nearly double-digit annual increase over the past two decades, other regional powers like India and Japan are also attempting to flex their military muscles by purchasing modern weaponry. Before long, the Indian Navy is expected to grow into the world’s third or fourth largest navy. Similarly, by beefing up its navy,

⁵For example, see “Xi Jinping: China to further friendly relations with neighboring countries,” Foreign Ministry of People’s Republic of China, October 28, 2013, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/celk/eng/xwdt/t1093335.htm>; and “Xinhua Insight: Xi’s whirlwind diplomacy sweeps China to center stage,” *Xinhua*, January 28, 2016, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-01/28/c_135054887.htm.

⁶See, for instance, “Clinton stresses security in Pacific in pushing American partnership model,” *Xinhua*, September 1, 2012, <http://en.people.cn/90777/7932593.html>; and the White House, “Remarks by President Obama at APEC CEO Summit,” November 10, 2014, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/11/10/remarks-president-obama-apec-ceo-summit>.

⁷Abhinav Goyal and Niharika, “India and China in the Indian Ocean Region,” in Bimal N. Patel, Aruna Kumar Malik, and William Nunes, *Indian Ocean and Maritime Security: Competition, Cooperation and Threat* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2016), p. 53.

China will be in a position not subject to any fatal threat from other regional powers on the main SLOCs.

In the eyes of many political elites, the Asia-Pacific region has already become a center stage of world politics. In his book, *The Pivot: The Future of American Statecraft in Asia*, former U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Kurt M. Campbell⁸ gives a very brief yet challenging analysis of the United States' Asia Rebalancing strategy initiated by the Obama administration. His argument is basically attuned to Hillary Clinton's article "America's Pacific Century," which was published in *Foreign Policy* in October 2011. In this article, Hillary elaborates on how the Asia-Pacific region is significant for America's future: for America, the Asia-Pacific is geo-economically, geo-strategically and geopolitically vital, and "the future of politics will be decided in Asia, not Afghanistan or Iraq, and the United States will be right at the center of the action."⁹

The U.S. has paid increasing strategic attention to the Indo-Pacific since the Obama administration.

Although the focus of the Obama administration's Asia Rebalancing efforts was on the Asia-Pacific, the role of India and the Indian Ocean was never neglected. As a matter of fact, former U.S. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta lauded India as a "lynchpin" for the United States' Asia-Pacific strategy as early as 2012,¹⁰ and some Indian scholars have been arguing that "India could help maintain strategic equilibrium in the

Indo-Pacific, if it is prepared to broaden its thinking."¹¹ As Asia plays an increasingly critical role in global geopolitical and geo-economic affairs, the Indian and Pacific Oceans have become the backbone of trade which drives Asia's economy. The trade network within these two oceans links Asia,

⁸Kurt Campbell, *The Pivot: The Future of American Statecraft in Asia*, (New York: Hachette, 2016).

⁹Hillary Clinton, "America's Pacific Century," *Foreign Policy*, Vol. 189, No. 1 (2011), pp. 56–63.

¹⁰"India 'lynchpin' for US strategy in Asia: Panetta," *AFP*, June 7, 2012, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/390176/india-lynchpin-for-us-strategy-in-asia-panetta/>.

¹¹For example, see Abhijit Singh, "Rebalancing India's Maritime Posture in the Indo-Pacific," *The Diplomat*, September 5, 2014, <https://thediplomat.com/2014/09/rebalancing-indias-maritime-posture-in-the-indo-pacific/>.

North and South America, Africa, Europe and the Middle East. As the third largest water body in the world, the Indian Ocean has the most important SLOC for oil trade among major Asian economic powers. The SLOC in the Indian Ocean covers quite a few choke points, with 40 percent of internationally traded oil transported through the Strait of Hormuz, 35 percent shipped through the Strait of Malacca and 8 percent through the Bab el-Mandab Strait. In addition, this region witnesses more than half of armed conflicts in the world.¹²

Perhaps this is the reason why different countries with various policy considerations are all paying growing attention to the Indo-Pacific. China has put forward the “21st Century Maritime Silk Road” which stretches from southern China to the Strait of Hormuz and Gulf of Aden, while the United States is ready to reengage the region by strengthening alliances and increasing military presence in the region. India is also seeking regional supremacy by claiming that the Indian Ocean is “India’s Ocean,” and it is engaging different Pacific countries by turning its “Look East” policy into “Act East.” Likewise, Japan asserts a “free and open” Asia-Pacific strategy, with Delhi and Tokyo coming ever closer in recent years under the idea of “confluence of the two seas.” And Indonesia is ready to actively participate in regional geopolitics with its policy of “Global Maritime Axis” as well. Indeed, all regional and extraterritorial powers have been more or less involved in a “tug of war” in the Indo-Pacific.¹³

In this regard, the “Quad” forged by the United States with Japan, India, and Australia will have lasting and profound effect on peace and security of the whole region, especially the future trends of China-India relations. For one, China’s economic growth is largely dependent on foreign trade and secure energy supply through the Indian Ocean, thus it has to take every effort to address the geopolitical risks it faces — that is, the “Malacca Dilemma” — to safeguard its economic and security interests. For another, India enjoys a better geographical location in terms of trade and energy security through the Indian Ocean, its strategic position is

¹²Ambesh Kumar Pandey, “The United States of America’s Geopolitics around Arabian Sea,” *International Journal of Applied Research*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2017), pp. 243–245.

¹³Peter Lehr, “The Challenge of Security in the Indian Ocean in the 21st Century: Plus ça change...,” *Heidelberg Papers in South Asian and Comparative Politics*, No. 13 (November 2002), <http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/volltextserver/4124/1/hpsacp13.pdf>.

further enhanced by development of the U.S.-led “Quad,” although there remains some skepticism between the United States and India about each other’s strategic deliberation of their respective regional roles. For now, it is widely believed that no country can be a sole dominant power of the vast Indo-Pacific region, and any attempt to seek hegemony will undoubtedly face strong resistance from other regional powers.¹⁴

The New Maritime Silk Road and China’s Ambition

Given the strategic significance of the Indo-Pacific region, China has taken continuing efforts to secure its trade routes and consolidate its regional influence. In particular, China proposed the BRI in 2013 that includes the “Silk Road Economic Belt” and the “21st-century Maritime Silk Road,” in order to reestablish the ancient Silk Road by connecting Southeast Asia with Africa and Europe through infrastructure/port development in countries along the coastlines. Aiming at increasing investment and collaboration along the Belt and Road, the idea is quite innovative; if put into action, it will link China to the Asia-Pacific economic circle in the east and the European economic circle to its west. In 2014, a 40-billion-USD Silk Road Fund was announced, and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) was also established by China with the initial capital of 100 Billion USD for infrastructure finance across the continent.

Since the early 1990s, China has adopted the “going abroad” strategy considering its ever-growing overseas interests. Topping the world’s energy consumption, China has surpassed the United States in terms of energy demands since 2010. Therefore, China finds it imperative to manage an uninterrupted and secure energy supply, which mainly comes from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) through maritime routes.¹⁵ To secure its energy supply through the SLOCs in the Indian Ocean, China has been investing in some new ports in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Myanmar, among other countries, which will also boost local economy by

¹⁴Goyal and Niharika, “India and China in the Indian Ocean Region,” in Patel, Malik, and Nunes, *Indian Ocean and Maritime Security: Competition, Cooperation and Threat*.

¹⁵Sujata Ashwarya Cheema and Suruchi Aggarwal, “China and India in the Persian Gulf and Other Energy Theatres: Cooperation or Conflict?,” in Sidda Goud and Manisha Mookherjee, eds., *China in Indian Ocean Region* (Mumbai: Allied Publishers 2016), p. 116.

creating jobs and promoting trade.¹⁶ However, some scholars contend that the Chinese initiative is not only based on economic considerations, but it is aimed to enhance China's strategic influence as well. Recently released Chinese defense documents reveal that China will focus on securing overseas interests by enhancing military power at various strategic locations.¹⁷ Thus, China has established a logistic base in Djibouti and conducted military exercises with Pakistan, sending submarines and warships to the Pakistani port of Gwadar.¹⁸ To China, Gwadar is currently the most strategically important port in the Indian Ocean and considered as the hub of the BRI.

This may partly explain why China initiated the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which will connect China's western provinces further with Gwadar, and secure its oil transits bypassing main choke points in the west Pacific. The CPEC will benefit not only China and Pakistan, but also the whole region, as it will open up new trade routes for landlocked Central Asian countries to help them import and export products through Gwadar and SLOCs in the Indian Ocean. Notably, Central Asian countries that are abundant in energy resources can have access to the sea through the CPEC. Meanwhile, China has increased its investment in many Indo-Pacific countries including Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Maldives.

At the same time, China has been rapidly upgrading its military structure and capabilities over the past two decades. Although military modernization efforts were taken in the early 1980s, it was the 1991 Gulf War that prompted Chinese leaders to speed up the process, after seeing the irresistible conquest and overwhelming power of the United States and its allies. Especially in recent years, China has more often than not announced new breakthroughs in military technologies; an aircraft carrier with all modern technological facilities has been deployed in the Pacific, and a

¹⁶Dipankar Banerjee, "China's One Belt One Road Initiative — An Indian Perspective," *ISEAS Perspective*, No. 14 (2016), <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS.Perspective.2016.14.pdf>.

¹⁷See, for example, "2015 Zhongguo Guofang Baipishu Zhongguo de Junshi Zhanlue (China's National Defense White Paper 2015, China's Military Strategy)," *Huanqiu*, May 26, 2015, <http://world.huanqiu.com/hot/2015-05/6530015.html>.

¹⁸David Brewster, "Silk Roads and Strings of Pearls: The Strategic Geography of China's New Pathways in the Indian Ocean," *Geopolitics*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (2017), pp. 269–291.

second, more advanced carrier is being built; latest Kilo-class submarines with the best attacking quality and modern destroyers equipped with guided missiles were bought from Russia. All these would strengthen China's strategic position in the Indo-Pacific.¹⁹

China's moves in the Indian Ocean aggravate the U.S. concern about Beijing's strategic ambition.

Beijing's move to make itself a strong geopolitical player in the region has triggered much concern from the United States, India, Japan, Singapore and Australia, among others, which, in turn, have begun to join hands to balance China's ever-expanding influence. Military tensions in the region are on the rise. China is equipping Pakistan with the latest submarines and other naval vessels, and they hold regular joint military

exercises in the Indian Ocean. Separately, India has built a strategic partnership with Vietnam and regularly holds naval exercises with Australia, Indonesia, Japan and most importantly, the United States.²⁰ It seems that a "great game" in the Indian Ocean is going on and more and more global players are getting involved. Although China's BRI is meant to lessen the confrontational edge of the game by economic means like business investment, infrastructure development and economic partnerships, New Delhi has remained suspicious about China's intention behind the BRI and thus has chosen to boycott the initiative — despite the fact that the initiative is gaining gradual acceptance from the international community — more than 60 countries attended China's summit forum on the BRI held in Beijing in May 2017.

¹⁹Michael S. Chase, Cristina L. Garafola, and Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, "Chinese Perceptions of and Responses to US Conventional Military Power," *Asian Security*, 2017, pp. 1–19.

²⁰Alexious Lee, "A Brilliant Plan: One Belt, One Road," Credit Lyonnais Securities Asia, <https://www.clsa.com/special/onebeltoneroad/>; Thomas F. Lynch III and James J. Przysup "India-Japan Strategic Cooperation and Implications for US Strategy in the Indo-Asia-Pacific Region," INSS Perspectives No. 24 (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University, 2017), <http://inss.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/inss/Strategic-Perspectives-24.pdf?ver=2017-03-14-123654-447>.

The U.S. “Indo-Pacific Strategy” under President Trump

During the past four decades, the United States has remained a hegemonic power in the Asia-Pacific. Nevertheless, its regional influence has been declining in recent years, especially since President Trump assumed office. In contrast, China's domestic reforms as well as its win-win economic policies are increasingly attractive to regional countries and helping it win much recognition and influence in the region. Feeling the growing challenge from China in global economy and world status, the Obama administration decided to shift the focus of U.S. foreign policy from the Middle East to the Asia Pacific by launching the “Rebalancing to Asia” strategy in 2011.²¹ To the United States, the political, strategic and economic weight of the Asia-Pacific region has made it a new power center of global geopolitics. To strengthen its regional leadership, the Obama administration began to build stronger partnerships with Asia-Pacific countries, with an emphasis on increasing American political strengths, strategic power and economic engagement.²²

When addressing the Australian Parliament in 2011, President Obama said that the United States had been determined to play a bigger and longstanding role to reshape the entire Asia-Pacific region for its bright future; in a similar vein, Washington would coordinate and help regional countries to formulate rules and norms in the Asia-Pacific region.²³ Under the “Rebalancing to Asia” strategy, the Obama administration took many efforts to enhance U.S. economic and strategic presence in the region. For instance, the United States held a number of joint military exercises with Japan, South Korea, Australia and some ASEAN countries, and provided legal and diplomatic support for China's regional competitors and challengers in the East China Sea and South China Sea disputes. A document

²¹Wu Zhengyu, “The Crowe Memorandum, the Rebalance to Asia, and Sino-US Relations,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (2016), pp. 389–416.

²²Vivek Mishra, “Indo-US Security Cooperation: Implications for the Indian Ocean,” *Maritime Affairs: Journal of the National Maritime Foundation of India*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (2017), pp. 1–9.

²³The White House, “Remarks by President Obama to the Australian Parliament,” November 17, 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/17/remarks-president-obama-australian-parliament>.

released by the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) in 2015 also indicated that the United States would redefine the size and role of its Pacific Command (USPACOM) and relocate 60 percent of U.S. naval and air forces to the Asia-Pacific by 2020.²⁴ Meanwhile, the Obama administration managed to sign the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) with 11 other regional countries to seek more trade and investment opportunities and safeguard the U.S.-dominated regional economic order.

The Trump administration's Indo-Pacific strategy needs more clarification and less self-centered deliberation.

During the presidential campaign, Donald J. Trump openly criticized President Obama for his "Rebalancing to Asia" strategy and the TPP in particular.²⁵ Soon after taking office, he signed an Executive Order to announce the U.S. withdrawal from the TPP. Almost one year after his inauguration, the White House finally issued the first National Security Strategy Report under Trump's presidency, which declares that "We welcome India's emergence as a leading

global power and stronger strategic and defense partner. We will seek to increase quadrilateral cooperation with Japan, Australia, and India."²⁶ The U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy has thus set a new guideline for future U.S. maneuvers in the vast Indo-Pacific region.

Strong and determined as it may sound, the strategy needs more clarification and a less self-centered tone if it is to be understood and supported by its allies and regional partners. At the multilateral level, there is still no indication from Washington for greater engagement with regional forums like the ASEAN-centered platforms and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC); instead, it tends to renegotiate trade deals with Asia-Pacific economic partners under the "America First" doctrine, making its

²⁴US Joint Chief of Staff Office, *The National Military Strategy of the United States of America 2015*, http://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Publications/2015_National_Military_Strategy.pdf.

²⁵Shin Kawashima, "Japan-US-China Relations during the Trump Administration and the Outlook for East Asia," *Asia-Pacific Review*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (2017), pp. 23–36.

²⁶The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: White House, December 2017), p. 46.

commitment to regional security and prosperity sound like a disguise for maximizing U.S. interests at the cost of others. Besides, the Trump administration is more prone to managing individual challenges rather than adopting a holistic approach, which is indicated in its withdrawal from the TPP.

In the meantime, the mismanagement of U.S.-China relations also triggers anxieties across the Indo-Pacific region. U.S. allies like the Philippines are now leaning toward Beijing mainly for economic benefits. With China's strenuous efforts to build the BRI with regional countries and the cooling down of the South China Sea issue, China's appeal to Southeast Asian and South Asian countries are on a rapid rise compared with the United States' sluggish economic engagement in the region.

Furthermore, after more than a year of Trump's presidency, there remains a long list of unfilled senior positions in numerous governmental departments and agencies; the lack of coherence in the administration's messaging and the obscurity of its decision-making process also cause growing doubt from the U.S.' allies and partners in the region while deliberating policies toward China and the United States. Consequently, a larger power vacuum is being created as China, with its steady pace and stamina in pushing forward the BRI as well as other multilateral and bilateral initiatives, tries to fill it from an ever more confident strategic position.²⁷

In November 2017, President Trump paid a visit to East Asia where he had the chance to articulate his vision and aspiration toward this region at the APEC Summit held in Da Nang, Vietnam. Instead of boosting confidence of regional countries in their economic future, he highlighted his "America First" doctrine and emphasized the importance of India's role in regional security and development — ironically, India is not even a member of the APEC. Overall, President Trump delivered an extremely illusive vision for future economic integration in the Asia-Pacific region, so much so that he had to borrow Japan's version of the Overseas Private Investment Council (OPIC) to increase the U.S. influence in regional

²⁷Tongfi Kim, "Sino-American Competition as Security Suppliers in the Asia-Pacific," in Stefan Fröhlich and Howard Loewen, eds., *The Changing East Asian Security Landscape* (Berlin: Springer VS, 2017), pp. 39–59.

markets, while addressing concerns about the widespread appreciation of China's BRI.

China's regional influence is expected to keep expanding despite the U.S.' balancing efforts under the Indo-Pacific strategy.

At least for now, the Trump administration's Indo-Pacific strategy has not generated much resonance from U.S. allies and security or trade partners in Asia. To some, the strategy sounds too aggressive and unfamiliar to the Asian culture of inclusiveness and cooperation; to others, it may only strengthen the U.S. strategic dominance of the region under the "America First" doctrine. By contrast, Chinese President Xi Jinping vividly presented a vision of an

interconnected region with shared benefits, destinies and responsibilities. During his speech on the APEC Summit, President Xi categorically offered cooperation in the field of digital economy, quantum science and artificial intelligence to all member countries of APEC. Clearly, China is ready to fill the leadership vacuum that the United States is leaving in the region.²⁸

Conclusion

China is actively working on strengthening win-win cooperation and inter-connectivity within the Asia-Pacific region. In 2013, it launched the BRI that all regional countries, including Central Asian ones, can benefit from by trade promotion via such ports as the Gwadar Port of Pakistan. Besides, China has initiated the CPEC as a pilot project in Pakistan that is central to the success of the BRI. A growing number of regional countries are willing to collaborate with China, and even some European countries are eager to join in this initiative. However, given geopolitical considerations, the United States perceives increasing challenge from China and has taken some efforts to maintain its regional supremacy, especially by engaging India in this geopolitical game against China.

²⁸Lorena Oyarzún Serrano, "The Pacific Alliance and the Construction of A New Economic Regime?," in José Briceño-Ruiz and Isidro Morales, eds., *Post-Hegemonic Regionalism in the Americas: Toward a Pacific-Atlantic Divide?* (London: Routledge, 2017), p. 141.

As a pivotal region, the Indo-Pacific has become a new power center of global geopolitics. Although the Trump administration abandoned many important elements of his predecessor's "Rebalancing to Asia" strategy, especially institutional summit dialogues with ASEAN leaders and the narrowly-reached TPP, it has largely inherited the strong military stance of the Obama administration in increasing military presence and consolidating security allies and partnerships in the region. However, due to the uncertainty of President Trump's Indo-Pacific strategy and growing concern of regional countries about his "America First" doctrine, China's economic and strategic influence is very likely to continue expanding in both the Pacific and the Indian Oceans, creating a new balance-of-power structure across the vast region.