

## Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy: Accurate Diagnosis, Imperfect Prescription

Taehwa Hong<sup>1</sup>

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*In his landmark book *The End of History and the Last Man*, political philosopher Francis Fukuyama contended that the end of the Cold War marked the end of this ideological battle in mankind's history. Liberal democracy had prevailed as the final ideological stage of human evolution, and although there would be sporadic, regional tyranny and authoritarianism, the global trend would overwhelmingly head towards Western-style democracy. However, the 21st century witnessed a seemingly unsustainable governance model in China, where the economy is largely liberalized but political power remains in the hands of the Communist Party. Two decades after exponential economic growth, Beijing has risen as a powerhouse that contends American hegemony both geopolitically and ideologically. Systemic failures of popular democracy, from the chaotic Arab Spring in the Middle East to the alleged Russian interference in the U.S. Presidential election, buttress the Chinese challenge to the Post-World War II liberal order. So far, the American response to China's rise has been limited by aspirations for cooperation. With China's growing influence on virtually every continent, the Trump Administration's Free and Open Indo Pacific Strategy provides a strong framework to curb China's ambition. However, the strategy needs to maintain room for areas of cooperation. It would be in Washington's interest to bolster key alliances and partnerships on trade, maritime dispute, and preservation of the liberal order. The dynamic between Washington and Beijing is arguably the most important bilateral relationship of the century, and the FOIP strategy will greatly shape their great power relations for years to come.*

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**Keywords:** Indo-Pacific Strategy, China's rise, Trump administration, Trade War, North Korea, East Asia, Belt and Road Initiative, Japan, India, Australia, Korea

### Introduction

In March 2018, the renowned international relations magazine *Foreign Policy*'s top trending article read: "Beijing's Threats Against Taiwan Are Deadly Serious." In the article, the writer contended that Chinese leaders are seriously considering a military takeover of Taiwan, as reunification

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<sup>1</sup> Taehwa Hong is an International Relations student at Stanford University and Asia Times opinion writer. His works have been featured in The Business Times, The Huffington Post, WorldPost, The Peninsula, and YaleGlobal. His research focuses on East Asia and the Middle East.

would be key to sustaining China's rise.<sup>2</sup> A clash in the Taiwan strait could potentially drag American naval assets into the scene, escalating into a superpower conflict. Just ten years ago, a Sino-American conflict over Taiwan was significantly less intense; Washington respected the "One China" doctrine, refraining from sending high-level officials to Taiwan.<sup>3</sup> China, despite relentlessly calling for Taiwan to bend under Beijing's control, was less assertive with this claim. In the intervening decade, China proclaimed its ambition to establish "new great power relations"<sup>4</sup> and realize the "Chinese Dream" of reemerging as a major powerhouse.<sup>5</sup> Beijing became more aggressive in the South China Sea, where it is currently involved in territorial disputes with a number of regional countries.

In January 2017, Donald Trump was inaugurated as the President of the United States. The Trump administration from the beginning made it clear it would work to diminish the trade deficit vis a vis China.<sup>6</sup> The 2017 National Security Strategy explicitly called out China as a "revisionist state" bent on challenging American values and leadership abroad.<sup>7</sup> In November 2017, President Trump laid out his Free and Open Indo Pacific (FOIP) strategy in the APEC summit meeting held in Vietnam.<sup>8</sup> While checking China's rise is not its sole objective, the Indo Pacific Strategy is widely seen as a response to China's increasingly aggressive posture in the region and a roadmap to maintain American hegemony. It is also a replacement of the Obama administration's Pivot to Asia strategy, which put more emphasis on cooperation with China than

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<sup>2</sup> Derek Grossman, "Beijing's Threats Against Taiwan Are Deadly Serious," *Foreign Policy*, May 22, 2018, accessed June 23, 2018, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2018/05/22/beijings-threats-against-taiwan-are-deadly-serious/>.

<sup>3</sup> Ryan Hass and Evan S. Medeiros, "Don't Squeeze Taiwan," *Brookings*, February 7, 2018, accessed June 23, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/02/07/dont-squeeze-taiwan>

<sup>4</sup> N. Janardhan, "Is China Forging a New Tripolar World Order?" *The Diplomat*, April 25, 2018, accessed June 23, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/04/is-china-forging-a-new-tripolar-world-order/>.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Lawrence Kuhn, "Opinion | Xi Jinping's Chinese Dream," *The New York Times*, June 4, 2013, accessed June 23, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/05/opinion/global/xi-jinpings-chinese-dream.html>.

<sup>6</sup> David J. Lynch, "Trump Said He'd Shrink the Trade Deficit with China. It Just Hit a Record High," *The Washington Post*, February 6, 2018, accessed June 23, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2018/02/06/trump-said-hed-shrink-the-trade-deficit-with-china-it-just-hit-a-record-high/?utm\\_term=.826b060a9e2f](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2018/02/06/trump-said-hed-shrink-the-trade-deficit-with-china-it-just-hit-a-record-high/?utm_term=.826b060a9e2f).

<sup>7</sup> Josh Rogin, "Opinion | Trump's National Security Strategy Marks a Hawkish Turn on China," *The Washington Post*, December 18, 2017, accessed June 23, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/josh-rogin/wp/2017/12/18/trumps-national-security-strategy-marks-a-hawkish-turn-on-china/>.

<sup>8</sup> "Remarks by President Trump at APEC CEO Summit," *The White House*, November 10, 2017, accessed June 23, 2018, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-apec-ceo-summit-da-nang-vietnam/>.

the FOIP strategy does.<sup>9</sup> It is important to acknowledge that the FOIP strategy is an initiative in progress and a full assessment of the strategy will be contingent on the events that will unfold in coming years. Nonetheless, it would be worthwhile to assess the prospect of the initiative and recommend adjustments where necessary. Using two main criteria—effectiveness in restraining China’s expansion and enhancement of America’s own standing—this paper argues that the FOIP strategy requires major rearrangements to be more effective. The FOIP strategy correctly acknowledges the dangerous nature of Chinese expansion and the key elements to counterbalance it, such as the role of India and a strong coalition. However, the strategy ultimately puts America and China on a collision course, alienating U.S. allies in the process.

In recent years, there has been much optimism in the literature regarding the U.S.-China rivalry. In their essay “Ties That Bind: Strategic Stability In the U.S.-China Relationship,” Thomas Fingar and Fan Jishe lay out the most representative optimism. They argue that the great power rivalry is a major perception problem rather than an inevitable clash of interests, and that the two powers share more common interests, most notably mutual vulnerability and extensive economic interdependence. They caution against “realist fatalism,” whereby rivalling nations complete a self-fulfilling prophecy by misinterpreting each other’s motives. There is widespread Chinese “suspicion” that the U.S. is determined to contain its rise and a reciprocal “concern” in the U.S. that China is trying to displace America as the leading world power. In the same vein, many Chinese experts reflexively interpret “any action by the U.S. that could have adverse impact on China” as having been designed “specifically for that purpose.” In their view, Beijing seems to strongly believe that Washington intends to bring it to its knees before China becomes too strong; these convictions—that conflict is inevitable—in fact makes it more probable, when in actuality a collision of interests can be managed with caution and diplomatic dexterity. Fingar and Fan therefore argue that the U.S. and China need to increase communication to lower the probability of unwanted conflicts as well as work to maximize mutually beneficial arrangements rather than seek to confront each other.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> “Trump’s Indo-Pacific Vision: A Solid Idea, Hard to Pull off,” *Aspenia Online*, February 19, 2018, accessed June 23, 2018, <http://www.aspeninstitute.it/aspenia-online/article/trumps-indo-pacific-vision-solid-idea-hard-pull>.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Fingar and Fan Jishe, “Ties That Bind: Strategic Stability in the U.S.-China Relationship,” *The Washington Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (2013): 125-138. doi: 10.1080/0163660x.2013.861718.

However, China has clearly become America's contender for global hegemony—economically, politically and ideologically. Their interests are increasingly zero-sum, at least from a long-term perspective. While China greatly benefitted from the postwar liberal economic order, it seems to be more than willing to deconstruct the system to its advantage. Beijing repeatedly resorts to currency manipulation for exports,<sup>11</sup> acquires advanced technology by forcing American companies to transfer propriety technology to Chinese ventures or through intellectual theft,<sup>12</sup> and heavily subsidizes strategic industries such as artificial intelligence.<sup>13</sup> The Trump administration even suggests it was a grave mistake for the U.S. to accept China as a member of the World Trade Organization in 2001.<sup>14</sup> In the same vein, Beijing's much acclaimed Made in China 2025 project<sup>15</sup> is an overt bid to overthrow the U.S.' technological lead and its offer to buy Middle Eastern oil in yuan rather than dollar is at least in part to undermine petrodollars.<sup>16</sup> While economic interdependence precludes serious possibility of an all-out clash, it has also become a political weapon, most recently demonstrated by China's suspected use of North Korean nuclear negotiations as a bargaining chip for more favorable trade terms.<sup>17</sup>

Politically, China has become increasingly assertive in the South China Sea and East Asia, with the central belief that increased Chinese power should translate into increased say even at the expense of its neighbors' sovereignty. As America seeks to pivot to East Asia from the Middle East's quagmires, China hopes to undo the U.S.-led alliance system in the region. Over the last few years, China has challenged American dominance in the region mainly by testing the resolve of America's alliances by means such as habitually flying over its neighbors'

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<sup>11</sup> Michael Lelyveld, "China's Depreciation Stirs Manipulation Debate," Radio Free Asia, August 6, 2018, accessed August 31, 2018, [https://www.rfa.org/english/commentaries/energy\\_watch/chinas-depreciation-stirs-manipulation-debate-08062018110106.html](https://www.rfa.org/english/commentaries/energy_watch/chinas-depreciation-stirs-manipulation-debate-08062018110106.html).

<sup>12</sup> Jethro Mullen, "How China Squeezes Tech Secrets from U.S. Companies," CNNMoney, August 14, 2017, accessed August 31, 2018, <https://money.cnn.com/2017/08/14/news/economy/trump-china-trade-intellectual-property/index.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Christina Larson, "China's Massive Investment in Artificial Intelligence Has an Insidious Downside," Science | AAAS, February 8, 2018, accessed August 31, 2018.

<sup>14</sup> Shawn Donnan, "US Says China WTO Membership Was a Mistake," Financial Times, January 19, 2018, accessed August 31, 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/edb346ec-fd3a-11e7-9b32-d7d59aace167>.

<sup>15</sup> Adam Segal, "Why Does Everyone Hate Made in China 2025?" Council on Foreign Relations, March 28, 2018, accessed August 31, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/why-does-everyone-hate-made-china-2025>.

<sup>16</sup> James Grant, "The End of the Petrodollar?" The National Interest, March 20, 2018, accessed August 31, 2018, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-end-the-petrodollar-25002>.

<sup>17</sup> Betsy Klein, "Trump Casts Blame on China for North Korea Challenges," CNN, August 30, 2018, accessed August 31, 2018, <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/08/29/politics/donald-trump-north-korea-war-games-china/index.html>.

Air Defense Identification Zones<sup>18</sup> or disrupting military cooperation among South Korea, Japan and the U.S.<sup>19</sup> China also leveraged North Korea's nuclear program to lure South Korea into its own orbit, demanding more compliance from Seoul in return for reigning in Pyongyang.<sup>20</sup> Its long time call for dual-suspension<sup>21</sup> of joint U.S.-South Korea military exercises and North Korean nuclear and missile tests is fundamentally grounded on the belief that for Beijing the Washington-Seoul alliance is as equally disturbing as North Korea's nuclear aggressions.

Ideologically, while the appeal of Chinese communism has significantly depleted since the closure of the Cold War, the "Chinese Model"<sup>22</sup> or the "Beijing Consensus"<sup>23</sup> based on authoritarian governance is gaining momentum while Western liberal democracy is perceived to be in crisis. Many western citizens are increasingly disillusioned with their democratic system, and as former Prime Minister of Australia Kevin Rudd noted, China is "loud and proud about its 'authoritarian capitalist model.'"<sup>24</sup> Overall, President Xi Jinping's regime needs foreign policy successes to overcome the domestic failings of the Chinese Communist Party's rule<sup>25</sup>—the more China is plagued with domestic contradictions, the more it needs to reclaim its sovereignty over Taiwan, build artificial islands in the South China Sea and voice opposition to missile defense systems in Asia. The growing footprint of Xi Jinping's China Dream needs to be addressed, and the Trump administration's FOIP strategy should be calibrated to that end.

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<sup>18</sup> Hyunsuk Jun, "Chinese Spy Jet Buzzes Korea's Air Identification Zone Again," *The Chosun Ilbo*, August 30, 2018 accessed August 31, 2018, [http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2018/08/30/2018083001858.html](http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2018/08/30/2018083001858.html).

<sup>19</sup> Youngho Kim, "Triangular Formations in Asia Genesis, Strategies, Value Added and Limitations," 11th Berlin Conference on Asian Security (BCAS), September 7, 2017, accessed August 30, 2018, [https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/arbeitspapiere/BCAS2017\\_Paper\\_Young\\_Ho\\_Kim.pdf](https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/arbeitspapiere/BCAS2017_Paper_Young_Ho_Kim.pdf).

<sup>20</sup> Jae Ho Chung and Jyoon Kim, "Is South Korea in China's Orbit?: Assessing Seoul's Perceptions and Policies," *Asia Policy* 21, no. 1 (2016): 123-145. doi: 10.1353/asp.2016.0000.

<sup>21</sup> Emily Rauhala, "Ending Military Exercises? Trump's Plan for North Korea Was China's Plan First," *The Washington Post*, June 12, 2018, accessed August 31, 2018.

<sup>22</sup> Gideon Rachman, "'The China Model', by Daniel Bell," *Financial Times*, June 19, 2015, accessed August 31, 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/6105bd40-15a4-11e5-8e6a-00144feabdc0>.

<sup>23</sup> Nathan, Andrew J. "The Beijing Consensus: How China's Authoritarian Model Will Dominate the Twenty-first Century." *Foreign Affairs*. April 21, 2010. Accessed August 31, 2018. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/capsule-review/2010-05-01/beijing-consensus-how-chinas-authoritarian-model-will-dominate>.

<sup>24</sup> Kevin Rudd, "How Xi Jinping Views the World," *Foreign Affairs*, May 10, 2018, accessed August 31, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-05-10/how-xi-jinping-views-world>.

<sup>25</sup> Yun Sun, "Chinese Public Opinion: Shaping China's Foreign Policy, or Shaped by It?" *Brookings*, July 28, 2016, accessed August 31, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/chinese-public-opinion-shaping-chinas-foreign-policy-or-shaped-by-it/>.

### Characteristics of the FOIP Strategy

What exactly is the Free and Open Indo Pacific Strategy? The official State Department briefing in April 2018 provides a broad framework of this initiative. Alex Wong, the Deputy Assistant Secretary in the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, stated that “free,” on the international level, means “free from coercion” and the ability to “pursue sovereignty,” while on a national level it means “good governance, fundamental rights, transparency and anticorruption.” “Open” signifies “open sea lines of communication and open airspaces,” “improved infrastructure to facilitate economic growth,” and “open investment.”<sup>26</sup> Given that the Indo Pacific strategy is a revival of the 2007 initiative by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, the current FOIP strategy also likely includes a strong coalition of “like-minded regional democracies” in Asia, extending from Japan in the east to India in the west.<sup>27</sup> This coalition will cooperate to preserve rule-based international order and universal liberal values, ensuring free access to maritime global commons. Most notably, a security architecture of the Quad—U.S., Japan, Australia and India—will be at the crux of the FOIP strategy to maintain stability and security.<sup>28</sup>

The first and foremost strength of the FOIP strategy is its accurate diagnosis of China’s rise; it has become evident that China’s dominance in the region is weakening the fundamentals of the regional liberal order. While the Obama administration shared similar concern, it seldom explicitly responded to China’s ideological and geopolitical challenge. In fact, the administration’s pivot was frequently criticized for the lack of assertiveness and weakened credibility for regional allies.<sup>29</sup> It failed to pressure China where it should have: trade and North Korea. China has long violated international trade norms and intellectual property rights; Chinese companies stole and copied Western technology under government connivance. Chinese dumping contributed to the increasing trade deficit for the U.S., which hit a whopping \$375.2 billion dollar in

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<sup>26</sup> Alex N. Wong, “Briefing on The Indo-Pacific Strategy,” U.S. Department of State, April 2, 2018, accessed June 23, 2018, <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/04/280134.htm>.

<sup>27</sup> “Japan’s Indo-Pacific Strategy Gains Momentum,” *China and Its Neighbours: Troubled Relations*, February 14, 2018, accessed June 23, 2018, [http://www.eu-asiacentre.eu/pub\\_details.php?pub\\_id=232](http://www.eu-asiacentre.eu/pub_details.php?pub_id=232).

<sup>28</sup> Tom Corben, “The Quad, Vietnam, and the Role of Democratic Values,” *The Diplomat*, May 25, 2018, accessed June 23, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/05/the-quad-vietnam-and-the-role-of-democratic-values/>.

<sup>29</sup> Simon, Tisdall, “Obama’s Failed ‘Asian Pivot’ Leaves China Ascendant | Simon Tisdall,” *The Guardian*, September 25, 2016, accessed June 23, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/sep/25/obama-failed-asian-pivot-china-ascendant>.

2017.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, the Obama administration hesitated to apply secondary boycott on Chinese companies that are illicitly trading with North Korea, although such transactions fund Pyongyang's nuclear weapons and missile program.<sup>31</sup> The FOIP strategy recognizes that much more pressure needs to be put on Beijing where necessary; the Trump administration's unprecedented pressure on China, including threats of secondary boycotts, has forced Kim Jong-un to the negotiating table as Beijing joined the Maximum Pressure campaign.<sup>32</sup> The FOIP strategy is intended to fully utilize America's alliance network and military and political advantage to pressure China on issues that threaten American interests. By taking a more confrontational approach, the U.S. government is acutely responding to a more confrontational China.

The FOIP strategy is also an adequate mode of response to new challenges from China, namely its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), previously called One Belt and One Road. The Chinese government plans to rebuild the ancient Silk Road by "interlinking trade deals and infrastructure throughout Eurasia and the Pacific," involving 68 countries to date.<sup>33</sup> While Beijing claims that it will be an innovative project that will bring prosperity to everyone involved, many are skeptical of its intentions. In fact, there are already widespread problems with Chinese projects in Venezuela, Sri Lanka and Myanmar: pollution, corruption and domestic political meddling.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, the BRI's infrastructure projects are in part intended to gain control of ports across the Indian Ocean and project Chinese military and political influence from Indonesia to East Africa.<sup>35</sup> The FOIP strategy, by putting unprecedented emphasis on the Indian Ocean, directly confronts this challenge. The stipulated importance of "freedom of navigation" and respect for international rules in the Indo-Pacific will directly tackle China's plans for the region;

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<sup>30</sup> Ana Swanson, "U.S.-China Trade Deficit Hits Record, Fueling Trade Fight," *The New York Times*, February 6, 2018, accessed June 23, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/06/us/politics/us-china-trade-deficit.html>.

<sup>31</sup> Yong-in Yi, "No Secondary Boycotts Expected on Businesses That Transact with North Korea," *Hankyoreh*, April 10, 2017, accessed June 23, 2018, [http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english\\_edition/e\\_northkorea/790072.html](http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_northkorea/790072.html).

<sup>32</sup> William Brown, "Maximum Pressure" *Beijing Style*," *The Peninsula*, April 30, 2018, accessed June 23, 2018, <http://blog.keia.org/2018/04/maximum-pressure-beijing-style/>.

<sup>33</sup> James Griffiths, "Just What Is This One Belt, One Road Thing Anyway?" *CNN*, May 12, 2017, accessed June 23, 2018, <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/05/11/asia/china-one-belt-one-road-explainer/index.html>.

<sup>34</sup> Xinsong Wang, "One Belt, One Road's Governance Deficit Problem," *Foreign Affairs*, November 17, 2017, accessed June 23, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/east-asia/2017-11-17/one-belt-one-roads-governance-deficit-problem>.

<sup>35</sup> Keith Johnson and Dan De Luce, "One Belt, One Road, One Happy Chinese Navy," *Foreign Policy*, April 17, 2018, accessed June 23, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/04/17/one-belt-one-road-one-happy-chinese-navy/>.

according to CNBC, Chinese media reported that Beijing plans to create new international courts—based on Chinese judiciary, arbitration and mediation agencies—to address trade and investment disputes along the Belt and Road.<sup>36</sup> In 2016, China outright refused to respect the ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague in favor of the Philippines over China in a maritime territorial dispute.<sup>37</sup> Although the Trump administration has yet to elaborate on specific measures to preserve the existing rule-based order in the Indian Ocean, the recognition of a clash between the liberal order and Chinese version of the world order is promising.

In the same vein, the FOIP strategy prudently recognizes India's role in regional stability and counterbalancing Chinese influence. As the largest democracy in the world and the second most populous country in the world, India boasts a rapidly growing market and modernizing military.<sup>38</sup> China was historically India's main contender and concern; there have been sporadic clashes over their borders, and China's increasing support for Pakistan—India's archrival—has strained bilateral relations.<sup>39</sup> In fact, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi tellingly refused to join the BRI earlier this year despite the project's purported benefits.<sup>40</sup> Fearing repercussion on its relations with Pakistan, the Obama administration never fully acknowledged the importance of India in the region. However, the Pakistani intelligence's relentless support for Taliban forces in Afghanistan and insurgents in India clearly shows such hedging was fruitless regardless.<sup>41</sup> The Trump administration clearly shifted its focus to further improving ties with India and correctly prioritized New Delhi over Karachi—although the crude way it did so is

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<sup>36</sup> Nyshka Chandran, "China Plans to Create New International Courts, and That Has a Lot of People Worried," CNBC, February 2, 2018, accessed June 23, 2018, <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/02/01/china-to-create-international-courts-for-belt-and-road-disputes.html>.

<sup>37</sup> "China Has No Legal Basis to Claim Rights in South China Sea: Court," ABC News, July 13, 2016, accessed June 23, 2018, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-07-12/china-no-legal-basis-south-china-sea-tribunal-finds/7622738>.

<sup>38</sup> Jason Burke, "Now India Is Growing Fast It's Time to Update Our Tired Image of the Country | Jason Burke," The Guardian, February 14, 2016, accessed June 23, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/feb/14/india-economy-growth-west>.

<sup>39</sup> Henry Kissinger. *World Order* (New York: Penguin Books, 2015).

<sup>40</sup> Krzysztof Iwanek, "The New Silk Road Is Old: Why You Should Ignore Belt and Road Initiative Maps," The Diplomat, May 29, 2018, accessed June 23, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/05/the-new-silk-road-is-old-why-you-should-ignore-belt-and-road-initiative-maps/>.

<sup>41</sup> Richard N. Haass, "The Pakistan Conundrum by Richard N. Haass," Project Syndicate, January 12, 2018, accessed June 23, 2018, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/united-state-pakistan-relations-aid-cutoff-by-richard-n--haass-2018-01>.



worrisome.<sup>42</sup> Rebooting India's role in securing the regional order is a timely strategy.

Lastly, the FOIP strategy accommodates some of the Pivot strategy's strengths. While President Trump himself has been overtly keen on unravelling the Obama administration's legacy<sup>43</sup>—ranging from the Obamacare to the Iran nuclear deal—his foreign policy team apparently acknowledges the importance reaching out to countries that had poor relations with the U.S. in the past, such as Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam and Myanmar. President Obama started such an initiative most notably by dramatically improving ties with Vietnam, removing the arms embargo on Hanoi that was in effect since 1984.<sup>44</sup> While these Southeast Asian countries are not central to the FOIP strategy itself, they remain crucial partners in America's overarching strategy-planning in Asia. It is positive that the FOIP strategy acknowledges the importance of such diplomatic resettlement, for it empowers American leadership and broadens partnerships.

### **Challenges of the FOIP Strategy**

However, the FOIP strategy has more flaws to fix than strengths to applaud. While it may be effective in curbing China's rise, it comes at the cost of undermining America's own standing in the world. The geoeconomics of the FOIP strategy center around the idea that the U.S. will work with its Asian partners to "promote high-quality bilateral free trade deals," which would replace the network of multilateral trade deals such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).<sup>45</sup> Nonetheless, it is on the multilateral stage that the U.S. can truly exercise and consolidate its regional leadership. The TPP for example would have not only expanded U.S. trade, investment and economic growth, but also set common labor and environmental standards and establish e-commercial rules and

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<sup>42</sup> Saba Aziz, "Pakistan-US War of Words over Donald Trump's Tweet," *Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* | Al Jazeera, January 2, 2018, accessed June 23, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/01/pakistan-war-words-donald-trump-tweet-180102055709366.html>.

<sup>43</sup> Jessica Kwong, "All the Ways Trump Has Undone Obama's Legacy after Iran Nuclear Deal Withdrawal," *Newsweek*, May 8, 2018, accessed June 23, 2018, <http://www.newsweek.com/trump-undoing-obamas-legacy-and-iran-nuclear-deal-latest-casualty-916150>.

<sup>44</sup> James Hookway, "5 Things to Know About Obama's Trip to Vietnam," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 23, 2016, accessed June 23, 2018, <https://blogs.wsj.com/briefly/2016/05/22/5-things-to-know-about-obamas-trip-to-vietnam/>.

<sup>45</sup> Mireya Solís, "The New Geopolitics of Trade in Asia," *Brookings*, November 28, 2017, accessed June 23, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2017/11/15/the-new-geopolitics-of-trade-in-asia/>.

intellectual property rights.<sup>46</sup> The decision to opt out of the TPP abandoned a splendid opportunity to reaffirm U.S. commitment to setting fair trade rules and offer an alternative to a Chinese-led trading system.<sup>47</sup> Even more, Washington has shown willingness to strong-arm its allies for better trade deals; President Trump even insinuated he could use American troops in South Korea as a leverage to reach a more favorable Free Trade Agreement with Seoul.<sup>48</sup> Having been elected with a promise to abandon “bad deals” that “steal American jobs,”<sup>49</sup> President Trump is driven by the political imperative to maximize American economic interest at all costs. In this case, the cost may be American credibility and leadership.

Similarly, President Trump’s ‘undiplomatic diplomacy’ undermines the FOIP strategy’s focus on the contest of ideologies. Despite the promise to protect the norm of national sovereignty, the Trump administration frequently demands absolute loyalty from its allies. Nikki Haley, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, even questioned why the U.S. should be sending aids to Third World countries that vote against American interests, although certain issues—such as the relocation of the American embassy in Israel to Jerusalem—make it hard for even American allies to side with Washington.<sup>50</sup> Granted, these threats do not amount to China’s outright infringement of national sovereignty on its neighbors. However, American leadership since the Cold War flourished with respect for sovereignty and democracy, as long as it is compatible with domestic fundamental human rights.<sup>51</sup> President Trump’s unfettered admiration for Xi Jinping’s de-facto indefinite presidential term,<sup>52</sup> along with his negligence of human right issues in the Philippines, Thailand and Malaysia, renders his regional allies to wonder if the U.S. has abandoned its ideals in favor of cold realpolitik. Domestically, President Trump has

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<sup>46</sup> James McBride, “What Is the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP)?” Council on Foreign Relations, May 15, 2018, accessed June 23, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/background/what-trans-pacific-partnership-tpp>.

<sup>47</sup> Xuan Loc Doan, “Without TPP Return, It’s Hard for the US to Deal with China,” Asia Times, April 22, 2018, accessed June 23, 2018, <http://www.atimes.com/without-tpp-return-hard-us-deal-china/>.

<sup>48</sup> Veronica Stracqualursi, “Trump Apparently Threatens to Withdraw US Troops from South Korea over Trade,” CNN, March 16, 2018, accessed June 23, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/03/15/politics/trump-us-troops-south-korea/index.html>.

<sup>49</sup> Samuel Seitz, “Pushing Against the Populist Tide,” Foreign Affairs, December 12, 2017, accessed June 23, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2017-12-11/pushing-against-populist-tide>.

<sup>50</sup> Colum Lynch, “Haley: Vote With U.S. at U.N. or We’ll Cut Your Aid,” Foreign Policy, March 15, 2018, accessed June 23, 2018, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2018/03/15/haley-vote-with-u-s-at-u-n-or-well-cut-your-aid/>.

<sup>51</sup> Kissinger, Henry. *World Order*. NY, NY: Penguin Books, 2015.

<sup>52</sup> Jane Perlez, “President for Life”? Trump’s Remarks About Xi Find Fans in China,” The New York Times, March 4, 2018, accessed June 23, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/04/world/asia/donald-trump-xi-jinping-term-limits.html>.

been attacking mainstream news media, defaming judges and law enforcement agencies, demanding absolute loyalty from government officials and pouring out racist, sexist comments.<sup>53</sup> It is no coincidence that some in Europe are looking up to German Chancellor Angela Merkel<sup>54</sup> and French President Emmanuel Macron<sup>55</sup> to step up as the new leaders of the Free World, a title historically reserved for American presidents. In Asia, too, there is grave uncertainty whether American leadership can survive the Trump era.

Most importantly, the FOIP strategy puts the U.S. in a dangerous zero-sum game with China. While the diagnosis of China's expansion as a potential threat is accurate, the FOIP strategy significantly diminishes room for cooperation with Beijing. It does not fully recognize that some Chinese involvement is in fact helpful to regional stability. Even in trade, which President Trump believes is where the Chinese threat is greatest, China has been spearheading regional exchange and co-prosperity. China is the largest trading partner for 16 Asian countries including Singapore, South Korea and Japan, all of which are key U.S. allies.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, China is also America's largest trade partner and vice versa. Beijing at times also displayed remarkable restraint in translating its economic power into political leverage.<sup>57</sup> The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) for example provides much needed infrastructure investment in the region, and it does so with relatively little Chinese assertiveness, although Beijing is its main sponsor.<sup>58</sup> In addition, Washington and Beijing share the common goal of maintaining stability in the Korean peninsula. Even China's support for the North Korean regime can be explained with Beijing's concern of instability in its neighborhood. Beijing correctly views North Korean nuclear weapons as a destabilizing factor, and has

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<sup>53</sup> Joshua Kurlantzick, "The Trump Administration's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific": A Solid Idea, but Difficult to Pull Off," Council on Foreign Relations, February 21, 2018, accessed June 23, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/trump-administrations-free-and-open-indo-pacific-solid-idea-difficult-pull>.

<sup>54</sup> Sunny Hundal, "Angela Merkel Is Now the Leader of the Free World, Not Donald Trump," The Independent, March 19, 2017, accessed June 23, 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/angela-merkel-donald-trump-democracy-freedom-of-press-a7556986.html>

<sup>55</sup> Jack Shafer, Ramin Skibba, and Todd Tucker, "How Emmanuel Macron Became the New Leader of the Free World," Politico, April 22, 2018, accessed June 23, 2018, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2018/04/22/emmanuel-macron-trump-france-leader-218067..>

<sup>56</sup> Fang Tian, "China Rises to 16 Asian Countries' Biggest Trading Partners - People's Daily Online," January 12, 2018, accessed June 23, 2018, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2018/0112/c90000-9314972.html>.

<sup>57</sup> C. H. Tung, "America and China Need Each Other," The Diplomat, February 8, 2018, accessed June 23, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/02/america-and-china-need-each-other/>.

<sup>58</sup> Jeffrey Wilson, "What Does China Want from the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank?" Australian Institute of International Affairs, July 3, 2017, accessed June 23, 2018, <http://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/what-does-china-want-from-the-aiib/>.

been working with the U.S. to remove them.<sup>59</sup> The two countries are also both wary of the threats of international terrorism; the U.S. is continuing with its global War on Terror to protect the American homeland and its allies, while China is also wary of terrorist groups in the Xinjiang Province, many of which are believed to be linked with IS or Al Qaeda.<sup>60</sup> It remains to be seen how Washington can manage cooperation on these fronts when the FOIP strategy is clearly designating China as a de-facto adversary.

On that note, the FOIP strategy tries to pit other democracies against China, although these countries have close relations with China. It is highly doubtful whether these nations have the will and the ability to weaken their ties with China for FOIP strategy. In fact, most regional countries would likely resist taking sides in this polarizing contest. Even India, which is extremely wary of Chinese aggression, has long resisted being drawn into alliances with third parties; it has a longtime tradition of non-alignment.<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, India's strategic passage extends from the Malacca Strait to the Middle East, which do not align with the scope of the FOIP strategy, which was based on the purview of the U.S. Pacific Command (recently renamed as the Indo Pacific Command).<sup>62</sup> While the Japanese government in recent years has been working to revise its "Peace Constitution"—which bans Tokyo from any offensive military operations and from having an official national army—Japan's domestic constituents continue to oppose such plans.<sup>63</sup> It remains to be seen how far Japan can contribute to the security aspect of the FOIP strategy without stirring domestic opposition, and indeed a fierce response from China, its top trading partner. Even Australia, which is turning increasingly anti-China, cannot afford to fully cooperate with the FOIP initiative. China has already insinuated it could restrict imports (minerals and iron ores), education

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<sup>59</sup> Eleanor Albert, "Understanding the China-North Korea Relationship," Council on Foreign Relations, March 28, 2018, accessed June 23, 2018, [https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/china-north-korea-relationship?utm\\_medium=social\\_earned&utm\\_source=fb&utm\\_campaign=china-north-korea-relationship&utm\\_content=052318](https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/china-north-korea-relationship?utm_medium=social_earned&utm_source=fb&utm_campaign=china-north-korea-relationship&utm_content=052318).

<sup>60</sup> Uran Botobekov, "Al-Qaeda and Islamic State Take Aim at China," *The Diplomat*, March 8, 2017, accessed June 23, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/03/al-qaeda-and-islamic-state-take-aim-at-china/>.

<sup>61</sup> Michael D. Swaine, "Creating an Unstable Asia: The U.S. "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" Strategy," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, accessed June 23, 2018, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2018/03/02/creating-unstable-asia-u.s.-free-and-open-indo-pacific-strategy-pub-75720>.

<sup>62</sup> Swaine, "Creating an Unstable Asia".

<sup>63</sup> Adam Taylor, "Changing Japan's Pacifist Constitution Won't Be Easy for Abe," *The Washington Post*, October 24, 2017, accessed June 23, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/changing-japans-pacifist-constitution-wont-be-easy-for-abe/2017/10/24/5b11b1d4-b82a-11e7-9b93-b97043e57a22\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/changing-japans-pacifist-constitution-wont-be-easy-for-abe/2017/10/24/5b11b1d4-b82a-11e7-9b93-b97043e57a22_story.html).

(Chinese students) and tourism to Australia.<sup>64</sup> China's economic power simply makes it nearly impossible for American allies to participate in such an overtly anti-Beijing strategy.

The FOIP strategy also does not appreciate Beijing's genuine concern of American encirclement, increasing chances of direct conflict. Beijing clearly recognizes that Washington is still more powerful than it is; the drive for modernization of its military is largely to reduce that gap. While firmly responding to China's militarization and aggression, Washington should also seek to allay Beijing's fear that the U.S. wants to preempt China's rise by any means necessary. The so-called "Thucydides Trap" occurs when a "rising power is threatening to displace a ruling power."<sup>65</sup> The rising power feels a growing sense of entitlement and demands greater influence and respect, while the established powers tend to become more fearful, insecure and defensive. Standard crises spiral out of control, leading to a direct confrontation.<sup>66</sup> According to Graham Allison, a renowned International Relations scholar, this tense environment creates a situation in which "misunderstandings are magnified, empathy remains elusive, and third-party actions that would otherwise be manageable can trigger wars."<sup>67</sup> While the possibility of a Sino-American war remains low, the two could misunderstand each other over relatively minor issues. A zero-sum mindset increases the chance of an accidental conflict. Furthermore, the FOIP strategy's design of a security Quad with Australia, India and Japan in particular is already convincing the Chinese that the U.S. wants to create a prototype of the North Atlantic Organization Treaty (NATO) in Asia.<sup>68</sup> Having seen how the U.S. expanded NATO at the expense of Russian security,<sup>69</sup> China will be ever more threatened and highly incentivized to respond aggressively.

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<sup>64</sup> Gavin Fernando, "China's Warning to Australia," NewsComAu, April 20, 2018, accessed June 23, 2018, <https://www.news.com.au/finance/economy/world-economy/china-has-threatened-australia-with-a-trade-war-if-growing-lack-of-trust-continues/news-story/d32f3dc0267906034af733876e6e2ef3>.

<sup>65</sup> Graham Allison, "The Thucydides Trap: Are the U.S. and China Headed for War?" The Atlantic, December 5, 2016, accessed June 23, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/09/united-states-china-war-thucydides-trap/406756/>.

<sup>66</sup> Allison, "The Thucydides Trap".

<sup>67</sup> Graham Allison, "China vs. America," Foreign Affairs, November 20, 2017, Accessed June 23, 2018. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2017-08-15/china-vs-america>.

<sup>68</sup> Cary Huang, "Is Quad the First Step towards an Asian Nato?" South China Morning Post, November 25, 2017, accessed June 23, 2018, <http://www.scmp.com/week-asia/opinion/article/2121474/us-japan-india-australia-quad-first-step-asian-nato..>

<sup>69</sup> Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin, and Janine Di Giovanni, "Russia's Got a Point: The U.S. Broke a NATO Promise," Los Angeles Times, May 30, 2016, accessed June 23, 2018, <http://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-shiffrin-russia-us-nato-deal--20160530-snap-story.html>.

While the Quad is designed to maintain maritime security and secure key trade routes, it is undeniably also intended to counterbalance the Chinese navy's influence.<sup>70</sup> Hence, a classic security dilemma arises—whereby a country adopts a policy that it thinks is defensive, but its rivals consider it to be offensive in nature.<sup>71</sup> The FOIP strategy therefore heightens the risk of an accidental clash and could trigger a costly arms race.

### **Policy recommendations**

Given these drawbacks, the Trump administration will need to adjust its Indo-Pacific strategy to better suit the geopolitical landscape. If Washington is serious about winning the competition of ideologies and preserving the liberal international order, it should reflect on its own actions both at home and abroad. In essence, the U.S. needs to lead its allies by action, not words; Washington will need to strike a delicate balance between cooperation and competition with Beijing. First and foremost, there needs to be a fundamental shift in the America-First policy. For the U.S. to maintain its leadership in the Indo-Pacific, the Trump administration should be ready and willing to continue providing public goods in the area. Particularly when it comes to infrastructure investment, it still remains to be seen whether Washington would be willing to engage in large-scale, long-term infrastructure businesses despite little immediate—but huge potential long-term—benefits to the American people. President Trump has been extremely reluctant to spend money elsewhere on projects that do not directly enrich Americans.<sup>72</sup> However, if Washington wants to counter the expanding Chinese influence, it must be willing to maintain and expand its own role in the region.

Similarly, the U.S. should reengage in multilateral cooperation. At the core of President Trump's preference for bilateralism is a latent confidence that it's easier to reach a favorable deal when the U.S. is negotiating with a relatively weak country one-to-one, rather than face a coalition of them.<sup>73</sup> Such line of logic is reminiscent of none other than

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<sup>70</sup> Richard Javad Heydarian, "Revived 'Quad' Alliance Eggs on China's Response," *Asia Times*, February 28, 2018, accessed June 23, 2018, <http://www.atimes.com/article/revived-quad-alliance-eggs-chinas-response/>.

<sup>71</sup> Wang Dong, "Addressing the U.S.-China Security Dilemma," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, January 17, 2013, accessed June 23, 2018, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2013/01/17/addressing-u.s.-china-security-dilemma-pub-50668>.

<sup>72</sup> Oren Dorell, "Trump's Foreign Policy Often Put 'America First' – and Alone," *USA Today*, January 19, 2018, accessed June 23, 2018, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2018/01/19/trumps-foreign-policy-often-put-america-first-and-alone/1036558001/>.

<sup>73</sup> Harry G. Broadman, "Trump's Misplaced Penchant For Bilateral Trade Deals," *Forbes*, June 4, 2018, accessed June 23, 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/harrybroadman/2018/01/31/trumps-misplaced-penchant-for-bilateral-trade-deals/#21fa937f57b9>

China's tactical view of its own diplomatic relations; China has traditionally favored state-to-state negotiations and confrontations, in particular when it comes to territorial disputes.<sup>74</sup> The U.S. should consider rejoining the TPP, a decision that will not only bring more jobs to America, but also reaffirm U.S. commitment to free trade. On that note, imposing tariffs and regulations on imports from allies is becoming extremely detrimental to American leadership and should be reconsidered. For example, the U.S. should not expect Japan to come in support of American action against Chinese protectionism when it is also imposing brutal tariffs on steel imports from the Japanese.<sup>75</sup> Even American policies on Chinese imports need to be recalibrated, as they inadvertently damage the interests of U.S. allies in Asia. For example, as much as 16.9% of Philippine exports are a part of China's value chain<sup>76</sup>; if the U.S. restricts imports from China, Chinese producers will also be forced to reduce imports of resources from Southeast Asian countries. As much as Washington feels the strong urge to punish China's trade behaviors, doing so should come along with consultation, or at least an early notice for American allies.<sup>77</sup>

The U.S. should also remain open to cooperation with China; after all, the future of Asia will depend on how they shape the nature of their relations. Washington and Beijing need to continue to cooperate in key issues such as removing the North Korean nuclear threat. At the same time, as Matthew Goodman and Ely Ratner wrote on *Foreign Affairs* in March 2018, Washington needs to make it evident that "Beijing need to play by the rules if it wants to continue benefiting from open trade and investment in the Asia-Pacific and beyond."<sup>78</sup> It is evident that China wants to rewrite the rules of the international order because they were "not on the global stage when the current rules were formed."<sup>79</sup> To that end, it has been

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<sup>74</sup> Luo Jia, "China Is Right to Favour Bilateral Talks to Resolve South China Sea Rows," *South China Morning Post*, May 20, 2016, accessed June 23, 2018, <http://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/1028305/china-right-favour-bilateral-talks-resolve-south-china-sea>.

<sup>75</sup> Megumi Fujikawa, "Japan Weighs Retaliation Against U.S. Over Steel Tariffs," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 17, 2018, accessed June 23, 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/japan-weighs-retaliation-against-u-s-over-steel-tariffs-1526558497>.

<sup>76</sup> Karl Lester M. Yap, "Philippines Most at Risk in ASEAN From China-U.S. Trade War," *Bloomberg.com*, April 6, 2018, accessed June 23, 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-04-06/philippines-most-at-risk-in-asean-from-china-u-s-trade-war>.

<sup>77</sup> Ely Ratner, "A Better Way to Challenge China on Trade," *Foreign Affairs*, April 6, 2018, accessed June 23, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-03-22/better-way-challenge-china-trade>.

<sup>78</sup> Ratner, "A Better Way to Challenge China on Trade".

<sup>79</sup> "Notes From the Chairman," *Foreign Affairs*, April 17, 2018, accessed June 23, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/interviews/2016-08-01/notes-chairman>.

continuously seeking to fracture U.S. alliances.<sup>80</sup> For example, Beijing tried to economically coerce Seoul to stop the deployment of Terminal High Altitude Area Defense, an American missile defense system brought to Seoul in response to increasing North Korean threats.<sup>81</sup> The South Koreans were disappointed that the U.S. never brought up the issue when facing China, and South Korean President Moon Jae-in even considered reviewing the deployment in the fear of alienating Beijing.<sup>82</sup>

The Indo-Pacific strategy, despite its correct diagnosis of China, needs recalibration. The Trump administration should not just focus on slowing down Beijing's expansion at all costs. Instead, it should put more emphasis on bolstering its alliances, codifying the rules of trade, and preserving liberal values that encompass American leadership in the region since the Cold War. Most importantly, the FOIP strategy should not be a zero-sum approach to China. The strategy should act as a defensive deterrent against Chinese aggression, coercion and authoritarianism, not a ploy to bring China to its knees. After all, American allies expect the U.S. to be a global policeman, not a vengeful strongman.

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<sup>80</sup> Kevin Rudd, "How Xi Jinping Views the World".

<sup>81</sup> "Why China Is Wrong to Be Furious about THAAD," *The Economist*, March 23, 2017, accessed June 23, 2018, <https://www.economist.com/asia/2017/03/23/why-china-is-wrong-to-be-furious-about-thaad>.

<sup>82</sup> Byongsu Park, "President Moon's THAAD Flip-flopping Continues with Call for Additional Launchers," August 3, 2017, accessed June 23, 2018, [http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english\\_edition/e\\_national/805423.html](http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/805423.html).



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