

Comparative Approaches to the Indo-Pacific Region in 2022-23

By Gilbert Rozman

Introduction

As the Biden administration rolls out multiple pieces in its strategy for the Indo-Pacific region, leaderships on the front lines are responding. Here we compare four critical responses in 2022-23 to the unfolding U.S. approach. We begin with Japan, the closest U.S. partner and the initial architect of the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” initiative. Then we turn to South Korea, which had wavered under Moon Jae-in but grew more enthusiastic in 2022 under President Yoon Suk-yeol, announcing its own strategy in December. After taking close looks at the two U.S. allies, we shift sharply to a comparison of the clashing Chinese and U.S. strategies for the region, including an assessment of which side recently has gained the momentum. In the final article, we focus on Southeast Asia—with Indonesia in the forefront—for comparisons with the United States and receptivity to the emerging U.S. approach. Together, these articles provide a snapshot of how the Biden administration’s approach to Indo-Pacific architecture is faring in the spring of 2023.

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the U.S.-led response served as a catalyst for changes at the opposite end of Eurasia. The Biden administration with strong support from Japan seized the opportunity of conflict in Europe with an eye to possible conflict over Taiwan to advance a new strategy in the Indo-Pacific, building on Barack Obama’s “pivot to Asia” and Donald Trump’s “trade war” with China. Each of the articles below explains U.S. policy shifts in the wake of the war in Europe, while detailing some responses occurring along the western shores of the Pacific.

The overall picture from the four cases is of a U.S. strategy gathering support from allies with certain reservations, raising concern in China attentive to a loss in its own momentum, and drawing interest as well as skepticism across Southeast Asia, which fears polarization. If the U.S. strategy remains incomplete

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and the Chinese response is only now taking shape, new signs of coordination between Japan and South Korea with an eye to winning more support from the states of Southeast Asia are attracting interest. With the Biden administration poised to refine its approach into 2025, Yoon's term in office to 2027, Japanese resolve strong as Kishida basks in the success of the Hiroshima G7 summit, and Xi Jinping confirmed as China's leader to 2027 and beyond, the struggle over Indo-Pacific architecture is only likely to intensify in the years ahead.

Competition over Indo-Pacific visions has evolved into three distinct struggles: 1) whether the Chinese agenda for control over a unified, integrated southern tier of Asia will prevail or the U.S. response to block it, geopolitically and geoeconomically as well as with values, will succeed; 2) whether ASEAN centrality will endure, finding a way to thread the needle between these two strategies, or bipolarity will overwhelm the efforts of Indonesia and others to hold their ground; and 3) whether the "Global South" will close ranks behind another strategy, for which India aims to be the leader and Japan anxiously searches for common ground. In the first months of 2023 diplomacy advanced at a furious pace. Kishida went to Washington in January, to India in March, and to Hiroshima to lead the G7 and the Quad in May. He boosted the joint U.S.-Japan "Free and Open Indo-Pacific," backed ASEAN centrality, and endorsed India's "Global South" role. Yoon went to Japan in March, the U.S. in April, and Hiroshima in May, while affirming an Indo-Pacific strategy, supporting ROK-U.S.-Japan trilateralism, and hinting at a bolder role with ASEAN and India. While ASEAN was not in the forefront in this diplomacy, it was a big focus of contention.

On the opposite side of the contestation, Xi Jinping emerged from "Zero-COVID" with greater diplomatic energy. He visited Russia in March, doubling down on his support, hosted a Central Asian plus China summit in May, and reinvigorated his attention to Asia's "Southern Tier." When India's Narendra Modi went to the Pacific Islands and Australia after attending the G7, a battle for leadership in the "Global South" was fully joined. Chinese sought to discredit the very notion of "Indo-Pacific," while India, as a member of the Quad, was key to U.S. and Japanese hopes.

Yuki Tatsumi, "Japan's Indo-Pacific Strategy"

Japan's Indo-Pacific Strategy predates that of the U.S. Abe Shinzo envisioned it as early as 2007. After he left office in 2020, his vision of Indo-Pacific strategy had full support from his successors Suga Yoshihide and Kishida Fumio. By 2023, the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" concept had become the centerpiece of U.S. and allied strategic rethinking. Japan stood firmly by the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy, and when it revised its National Security Strategy in December 2022, the two countries' strategies showed a high level of alignment. This

article examines what drove Abe's approach, how it evolved under Suga and Kishida, and how Japanese view the Biden approach. It also offers a comparison between the Biden and Kishida approaches.

Suga and Kishida each added his own touch. Suga's biggest contribution was institutionalizing the Quad. Following the first Quad summit virtually held in March 2021, Suga visited Biden in April 2021 discussing coordination under the Quad. Kishida unveiled his own vision for Japan's Indo-Pacific strategy on March 20, 2023. Just as Abe had done, Kishida chose a visit to India to launch it, signaling the strategic importance India plays in Japan's Indo-Pacific strategy. Kishida's new strategy was driven by changes in the international security environment. First, in the context of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the necessity to prepare for a crisis across Taiwan Strait emerged as the more pressing security concern. Second, the Biden administration began to take concrete steps to counter China, particularly in the area of economic security. Along with the Ukraine war, this provided a new context in which Japan viewed its own Indo-Pacific strategy. Third, the "shared values" component gained more prominence in the U.S. approach. Finally, as Japan deepens its engagement in multilateral diplomacy anchoring these efforts firmly with the U.S.-Japan alliance has become ever more important.

Kishida Fumio continued to place the utmost emphasis on realizing the "FOIP." Kishida led Japan's effort to situate itself as a "connective node," between the U.S. and Europe on the one hand and the countries in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond on the other. At the 2022 Shangri-La Dialogue, he declared unambiguously his "strong sense of urgency that "Ukraine today may be East Asia tomorrow," stressing that "(n)o country or region in the world can shrug this off as 'someone else's problem.'" He identified the four underlying elements—enhancing regional connectivity, working toward the goal of a region that values freedom, the rule of law, freedom from coercion, and diversity, inclusiveness, and openness. Kishida put forward "principles for peace and rules for prosperity," defining it as "the backbone of FOIP" and including respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, no unilateral changes to the status quo by force, a free, fair and just economic order, and promotion of transparency in development finance. Kishida advocated "addressing challenges in an Indo-Pacific way." Also, he called for "multi-layered connectivity" among different parts of the region, essential for regional stability. Finally, he discussed the security of international maritime space and airspace.

Japanese and U.S. Indo-Pacific strategies have considerable overlap. For instance, both strategies are anchored in concepts such as the rule of law, connectivity, and respect for freedom and sovereignty. There are a few areas in which the approaches show differences, however. First is the overall tone of each strategy. On the one hand, the U.S. strategy has a stronger focus on political-military strategy. It emphasizes the importance of democratic norms and institutions and promoting cooperation with U.S. allies and partners that share democratic values. It discusses issues such as deterrence, North Korea's security threat, and cooperation within the Quad, NATO, and AUKUS. Furthermore, the U.S. strategy frequently mentions China.

On the other hand, Japan's strategy is more nuanced. It does not push democratic values, norms and institutions—or cooperation among the allies and partners that share these values—to the forefront. Rather, Japan's strategy places much greater emphasis on the rule of law and other international norms—such as no use of coercion, no unilateral change of the status quo, and safety of international maritime and air spaces—which countries can agree on regardless of their political and societal norms. For instance, Kishida's references to “addressing the challenges in an Indo-Pacific Way” and “three principles of the rule of law at sea” demonstrate Japan's focus on leveraging the country's willingness to look for practical cooperation.

Likewise, the two strategies show a big difference in the multinational economic frameworks that each country promotes. While the U.S. understandably promotes cooperation through the IPEF and APEC—in both of which the U.S. participates and which are not treaty-based—Japan focuses on cooperation through CPTPP and the WTO, treaty-based international agreements.

Finally, the two strategies have a very different outlook when it comes to engaging the regions outside the Indo-Pacific. The U.S. looks across the Atlantic Ocean as its primary focus for external partners to promote the “FOIP.” Its strategy discusses NATO and refers to AUKUS as a potential springboard to integrate Indo-Pacific and European allies to enhance deterrence. The “Global South” is by and large left out of the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy. In contrast, Japan views engagement with the “Global South” as essential to promote its “FOIP” vision. Its approach offers a good complement to U.S. strategy. Heavier focus on international norms softens the ideological edge of the “FOIP” vision, making it more palatable for the countries in the Indo-Pacific region, many of which are hesitant to alienate China. In addition, reaching out to the “Global South” places Japan as a connective node between the U.S. and these regions.

Katrin Katz, “The South Korean and U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategies: Seoul’s Cultivation of Regional Boldness from a Foundation of U.S. Alignment”

This article takes a deep dive into examining the similarities and differences between the South Korean and U.S. Indo-Pacific strategies. It argues that the ROK strategy is less U.S.-centric in its overall orientation and more aligned with the U.S. position on China than early observations suggest. South Korea’s strategy mirrors Washington’s positions across a broad range of issues—from regional order and North Korea to economic security and transnational challenges - while also taking steps beyond them in several areas to pursue its own, independent objectives. This approach—U.S. emulation coupled with independent supplementation—evolves from Yoon’s determination to make close U.S.-ROK alignment the central axis of Seoul’s foreign policy while simultaneously pursuing a bolder role for South Korea as a “global pivotal state.”

Seoul takes careful steps toward a tougher line on China that aligns more closely with the United States while attempting to avoid antagonizing Beijing. These tactics flow from Seoul’s economic and geopolitical constraints vis a vis Beijing. Similarities are found in the choice of “Indo-Pacific” as the identifying strategic concept, the focus on advancing a values- and rule-based order through collective efforts, the decision to embed North Korea within broader, regional security challenges, the pursuit of prosperity, economic security, and cooperation on new technologies, and the determination to build resilience to transnational challenges. Differences, however, appear in the specifics of the two approaches to China.

Yoon’s willingness to adopt the Indo-Pacific concept indicates the degree to which he is both less concerned than his predecessor about the potential to upset Beijing and more eager to align with the United States. South Korea’s use of the Indo-Pacific concept facilitates U.S.-ROK coordination on specific policies and initiatives insofar as both countries are able to work from the same geostrategic template. But it also achieves at least two other objectives for Seoul in its efforts to enhance its own regional stature. First, it puts South Korea in closer alignment with a number of countries within and outside of the region that have also introduced Indo-Pacific strategies. Second, centering its strategy on the Indo-Pacific concept provides economic opportunities for South Korea. This is because the Indo-Pacific has a larger footprint and greater collective economic heft than the areas that had previous ROK strategies.

The South Korean and U.S. strategies also align closely in prioritizing the advancement of liberal values and a rules-based regional order as top strategic aims, and in identifying collective efforts with countries within and beyond the region as the most effective means to achieve these aims. The shared U.S.-ROK

focus on collective action to strengthen the rules-based regional order generates new opportunities for Washington and Seoul to coordinate on a wide range of normative issues in the region. South Korea's heightened focus on liberal values, rules, and norms creates capacity for Seoul to partner with Washington on the more specific initiatives listed in the U.S. strategy, the strategy's focus on a values- and rules-based regional order provides South Korea with a unifying rationale for its engagement with a broad range of countries across numerous issues, that was lacking in the prior administration's New Southern Policy. Embedding its strategy in liberal values and principles also provides South Korea with a convenient justification for new partnerships and initiatives that are susceptible to generating domestic controversy or pushback from Beijing.

For South Korea, the downgrading of the North Korean issue likely reflects an effort to demonstrate to Washington and other countries that it is capable of focusing its attention on security issues beyond the peninsula. The supplementary mentions of the "global nature" of the problem in the South Korean strategy help Seoul to pursue additional objectives—luring new partners to collaborate on the North Korea issue, and increasing levels of international pressure on Pyongyang to denuclearize.

The U.S. and ROK strategies both include "prosperity" as a key objective and propose a number of new initiatives to bolster economic security and technological cooperation. Stances on IPEF and APEC highlight the degree of overlap and complementarity in the economic sections of the U.S. and ROK strategies. But the South Korean strategy also goes well beyond referring to these two organizations as vehicles for pursuing its regional economic aspirations. Specifically, the ROK strategy mentions its "efforts to promote free trade and address protectionism. South Korea is an export-reliant country that does not face the same degree of domestic constraints concerning international trade that the U.S. currently does. It is therefore able to match and surpass the economic initiatives listed in the U.S. strategy. The U.S. and ROK strategies similarly identify climate change, energy security, and global health as top transnational challenges.

South Korea's approach to China is one area that stands out for its degree of contrast with the U.S. strategy. South Korea's treatment of China in its strategy is considerably more muted. South Korea's cautious approach to China flows from its unique economic and geopolitical constraints and from its desire to avoid again being targeted by Chinese economic coercion—as it was in 2017. Despite Seoul's hesitation to avoid antagonizing Beijing, a reading of the strategy in its entirety reveals a willingness by South Korea to incrementally shift toward a tougher line on security issues that are sensitive to China.

Yoon's trip to the United States on April 24-29, 2023 reinforced the notion that, in the present-day context of zero-sum great power competition, South Korea faces difficulties pursuing closer ties with the U.S. without damaging relations with China. Yoon deepened alignment with Washington from defense and security to technological cooperation and business ties. Although Yoon's state visit saw the U.S. and ROK become more united in their regional and global stances—prompting Seoul and Beijing to drift further apart—areas of lingering tension in the alliance have the potential to shift these dynamics. Ongoing concerns among the South Korean public and politicians about summit outcomes could create pressure on Yoon. The success of South Korea's first Indo-Pacific strategy is far from pre-determined. Continuing to navigate close alignment with the United States, a more independent regional role, and stable relations with China will require deft maneuvering, in accord with the nuances so far expressed.

Gilbert Rozman, “How the United States Gained Momentum over China in the Indo-Pacific”

In 2020 Xi Jinping was on a roll. Donald Trump had left U.S. alliances in disarray and the home front in discord, unable even to unite against a pandemic. U.S. allies South Korea and Japan saw China (and Russia too) in ways at odds with U.S. strategy—Moon Jae-in relying on it for his obsession with North Korean diplomacy, and Abe awaiting a state visit from Xi in the hope of economic cooperation at odds with Trump's trade war. By 2023 the picture had changed. The U.S. has gained appreciably at China's expense. Competition in reshaping the Indo-Pacific order is continuing. The Chinese controlling strategy is vying against the U.S. blocking strategy.

The years 2021 to 2023 saw remarkable flux, as one initiative followed another with an eye to the geopolitical and geo-economic architecture of the Indo-Pacific. If in the 2010s the focus was on trade agreements, emphasis had shifted to military concerns and economic security. As two camps solidified under the U.S. and China, the “Global South” mostly kept hedging its bets. The U.S. is not asking states to choose a side but to prevent China from closing their options.

The United States had responded to Xi Jinping's initiatives of the 2010s cautiously but without real alarm. Chinese railed against Obama's “pivot to Asia” as if it would turn into a gamechanger blocking their regional plans, and they castigated Trump's “FOIP” plan as threatening a region-wide containment strategy, but in both cases, there was confident pushback that these initiatives were doomed. What stands apart in China's response to Biden's Quad, Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, etc. is the more defensive nature of its reactions, struggling to identify a positive outcome. Biden's policies, including steps to counter China in

the Indo-Pacific, play a big part in leaving Chinese apparently bewildered on how to regain the momentum for their own regional agenda. Comparing the two regional reordering agendas shows the initiative shifted to the U.S.

What distinguishes the U.S. strategy of 2023 from earlier U.S. strategies is the overwhelming emphasis on technologies of the present and the future. Export controls, investment limits on incoming and outgoing capital flows, multilateral coordination, and anticipation of the cutting edge technologies of the next generation are prioritized. Unlike Obama's preoccupation with freedom of navigation operations or Trump's with trade deficits, Biden put semi-conductors in the forefront, following his leadership of a broad coalition that imposed sanctions on Russia for its war in Ukraine with a sustained roll-out and buy-in from others on restrictions on dual-use products. As of early 2023, the degree of buy-in and the extent of the restrictions were unclear.

In 2022-23, the U.S. strategy toward the Indo-Pacific region takes four forms: 1) mini-lateral coalitions across the region; 2) traditional security deterrence to prepare for contingencies with tightened ties to other states; 3) value contrasts to expose the gap with China and the danger of its values for regional peace and stability; and 4) economic security steps to contain China's coercion, not a competitor's rise, preventing illicit civil-military fusion and its monopolies over technologies and supplies that could be employed to coerce other states to do China's bidding. The U.S. approach is three-fold: 1) security takes precedence, boosting alliances and pursuing the Quad with the understanding that India's alarm about Chinese aggression opens the door to a security grouping; 2) economics matter, but trade takes a back seat to economic security, as IPEF gradually is clarified; and 3) values receive attention, showcased by the December 2021 Summit for Democracy, although some partners hesitate to echo this U.S. position in light of resistance in the Global South. The Ukraine war further raised the priority on security, made the case for economic security much stronger, and reinforced the democracy-autocracy divide. The U.S.-led agenda stressed a free and open order based on the rule of law, sovereignty and territorial integrity, prohibition against the use of force, and peaceful resolution of disputes.

The fundamental source of bipolarity is China's assertive foreign policy. It left the aspirations of Russia for multipolarity in Asia unrealizable, while driving Japan and South Korea closer to the United States. India also turned closer to the U.S., but it used the Ukraine war to reaffirm in ties to Russia its wariness of bipolarity. Disappointed with China's complicating of triangularity with India and ASEAN, Russia desperately invaded Ukraine in its gambit to revive multipolarity. Such moves to brook the tide of bipolarity did not distract the U.S. and China from their overall goals.

In multiple areas, Chinese sources recognize deterioration in China's position. In writings on Japan and South Korea the change in tone is unmistakable, acknowledging the loss of further possibilities to drive a firm wedge between them and the U.S. as well as the negative impact of trilateralism. The link-up of NATO and U.S. alliances in the Indo-Pacific is recognized as a serious blow. Resoluteness to counter a contingency over Taiwan is worrisome to China as well. The Indo-Pacific concept, the Quad, and economic security all appear as challenges for the Chinese authors. Even Biden's ideological language is recognized as more threatening than was Trump's use of anti-communism. Chinese sources confirm U.S. successes and need for new responses.

Chinese analysis of Biden's Indo-Pacific policy reveals thinking about China's own strategy. Biden is accused of interfering with the "integration" and "unification" of the region and China's pursuit of a "common destiny." It is fragmenting the region, splitting ASEAN, and stirring up anxiety about a "China threat." Missing is any assessment of what China has done to enable these results.

The momentum shift in the early 2020s to the U.S. side over China reflected the inherent edge of a broad-based alliance network over a narrowly Sinocentric adversary as well as the success of the Biden administration's rejuvenation of U.S. strategic leadership with many new touches focused on economic security. Biden galvanized the considerable assets of Northeast Asia to launch a more comprehensive agenda for Asia's southern tier, recognizing the significance of Taiwan as a vital link between the two. In 2023 Xi Jinping was preparing a counter-strategy.

Chinese argue that two historically based ignominious ambitions drive regionalism against their country: 1) U.S. Cold War mentality to contain a rival, as occurred in the Korean War and anti-Soviet policies; and 2) Japan's prewar mentality to become the dominant power in Asia, which is carrying over to remilitarization. Omitted is any recognition of the backlash against China's expansionist and threatening behavior, leading countries predisposed to cooperate with it to join in resistance. The Quad was born not from a compulsion to contain but from defensive ties.

China's BRI and other regional plans aroused anxiety among many of its neighbors, who rallied behind a U.S. led approach to limit the potential of Chinese coercion. As BRI shifted in the face of economic doubts and recipient wariness, China lost momentum for reshaping regional architecture. After halting counter-moves by Obama and Trump, Biden crystallized a more comprehensive response centered on mini-lateral security groups and economic security restrictions, coupled with appeals for shared values. Although incomplete in specifics, the Biden plan capitalized on the Ukraine war and the prospect of China's forceful takeover of Taiwan to forge a

sustainable strategy to keep China from turning economic vulnerability in other states into regional control. Contestation over the Indo-Pacific was overshadowed by Russia's war in Europe, but neither the U.S. nor China lost focus on the primacy of the rivalry over regionalism.

Susannah Patton, “United States and Southeast Asian Indo-Pacific Approaches Compared”

The term Indo-Pacific has become the accepted way that the United States refers to the broad geographic region stretching from the western Indian Ocean, through Southeast Asia and into Northeast Asia and the Pacific. However, adoption of the concept in Southeast Asia remains mixed. At Indonesia's urging, ASEAN in 2019 adopted its “Outlook on the Indo-Pacific” (AOIP), and Indonesia itself readily uses the term. Most other Southeast Asian countries are cautious, associating it with a confrontational approach to China that they cannot endorse. Setting out key elements of both approaches to the Indo-Pacific, this article primarily focuses on Indonesia's perspective, reflected in the AOIP. It identifies common concerns, especially an emphasis on maritime cooperation, as the driver of convergence, as well as several divergences, notably questions about the value of cooperation as a driver, rather than the product of strategic trust, and the relative importance of “inclusive” versus “exclusive” or “minilateral” cooperative mechanisms. These divergences reflect underlying disagreements over how to engage China.

As Rory Medcalf has argued, the Indo-Pacific concept reflects countries' desire for a more inclusive vision of a broad and interconnected region in which China does not dominate. In contrast to the Trump administration's goal of U.S. primacy, the Biden administration's strategy seeks a “balance of power that is maximally favourable to the United States” and its allies and partners. It seeks to articulate an “end state” or vision for the region that it hopes all countries would share, including a region that is free, open, connected, prosperous, secure, and resilient. The Biden Indo-Pacific Strategy explicitly makes linkages with partners' approaches. It endorses the AOIP, sharing the view that Southeast Asia is central to regional architecture.

IPEF negotiators are working on four pillars: trade, including digital trade; supply chains; clean energy, decarbonization, and the green economy; and tax and anti-corruption. Negotiating new free trade agreements is unpalatable for the Biden administration. However, in recognition of the strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific, and the region's strong demand for greater U.S. economic engagement, it is seeking to negotiate IPEF as a compromise approach, complemented by other U.S. sectoral economic initiatives and broader global programs from which Indo-Pacific countries could benefit, such as the G7 Global Partnership for Infrastructure.

With the exception of Indonesia and the Philippines, many Southeast Asian countries are suspicious that the Indo-Pacific strategies of the United States and its allies are policies to contain China. The AOIP was ASEAN's way of articulating its own strategic vision and attempting to reclaim diplomatic space where it saw the Quad as potentially encroaching. Its adoption also reflects concern that growing polarization between the U.S. and China could squeeze Southeast Asia. The AOIP rejects rivalry and zero-sum thinking, listing as over-arching goals: a region in which ASEAN plays a central role, a region of dialogue and cooperation instead of rivalry, and a region of development and prosperity. The AOIP is “defensive” in posture: it portrays the region in positive terms as dynamic and peaceful, with ASEAN's focus to defend against challenges to the current order. The focus is overwhelmingly on economic matters. The AOIP does not break new ground, leading analysts to critique it for bringing “old tools” to new challenges.

That Indonesia needed to extensively lobby ASEAN to adopt the AOIP suggests that other countries either did not immediately see the need to adopt a common position on the Indo-Pacific, or had reservations about the concept itself. Malaysia's stance is especially relevant, as it, like Indonesia, geographically bridges the Indian and Pacific Ocean—a choice to distance itself from an “externally constructed term” that could draw it into U.S.-China competition. Philippines President Bongbong Marcos refers to the “Asia-Pacific” rather than Indo-Pacific; however successive Philippine defense secretaries have all used Indo-Pacific. Most ASEAN countries predominantly use the term Asia or Asia-Pacific in their own statements, but appear to be flexible in using the term Indo-Pacific in joint statements or meetings with the United States. Small continental countries such as Cambodia and Laos remain wary of the term.

The United States and its allies Japan and Australia clearly see the AOIP as worth supporting. While they likely recognize that the AOIP does not equate to support for U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy, they welcome its principles of inclusivity and openness. With the aim of buttressing these values within ASEAN, the United States now frames its assistance to ASEAN as falling within the four pillars of the AOIP (maritime cooperation, connectivity, sustainable development, and economic partnership). This is more a rhetorical than a substantive shift. Even China, which has long decried U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy as reflecting a “cold war mentality” acknowledged the AOIP. The AOIP might qualify as a strategy for boosting ASEAN centrality, but it does not present a plan to shape the Indo-Pacific. Aside from Indonesia, Southeast Asian countries are small states with limited strategic ambition.

The IPS refers to the Indo-Pacific as one region, but also acknowledges the existence of sub-regions, including Southeast Asia, South Asia and the Pacific Island countries. By contrast, the AOIP identifies the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean as two regions, rather than as “contiguous territorial spaces,” with Southeast Asia at the center. It may reflect ASEAN’s anxiety that Southeast Asia’s weight is diluted within an expansively defined Indo-Pacific. Whereas within the Indo-Pacific, ASEAN is just one of several groups and could be seen as facing competition from other forums such as the Quad, comprising regional heavyweight powers.

While the AOIP refers to freedom of navigation and overflight, it gives comparatively greater weight to less sensitive non-traditional security maritime issues. While the AOIP is focused on boosting ASEAN’s regional role, the IPS emphasizes cooperation with ASEAN and through what it calls “flexible groupings” such as the Quad. One explanation for these different approaches is that ASEAN countries tend to view practical cooperation as a building block for strategic trust, while the United States tends to take a more “top down” approach. All Southeast Asian countries, including Indonesia as the document’s key architect, see national economic development as far more important than regional security issues. As Evan Feigenbaum has written, “the business of Asia is still business.”

IPEF has received a mixed reception in Southeast Asia. Although it includes seven out of ten ASEAN countries, which indicates strong appetite to engage the U.S. on economic issues, leaders have publicly called on the United States to negotiate on market access, in line with the region’s own priorities. While IPEF negotiations are yet to play out, many analysts question why Southeast Asian countries would commit to high U.S. standards on labor and environmental issues without the quid pro quo of access to the U.S. market or large-scale programs of financial and technical assistance.

The AOIP framing tends to buttress a status quo that is under threat. The IPS, by contrast, frames China as already putting heavy pressure on countries in the Indo-Pacific and undermining human rights and international law in its pursuit of a regional sphere of influence. The U.S. goal is to arrest trends that are already underway and reverse recent changes. The AOIP was developed to respond to, rather than to endorse, competing visions of the Indo-Pacific, which explains why it diverges so greatly from U.S. approaches to the Indo-Pacific—to the extent that even China has implicitly endorsed it. It is closer to a critique than an endorsement of U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy.