



INDO-PACIFIC January 2019

The US sets its sights for 2019 in the Indo-Pacific, with China in mind

US Indo-Pacific directions for 2019 were firmly set with the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act signed into effect by President Trump on the 31st of December. This had bipartisan support, a rare event these days in Washington.

Though called the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act (ARIA), the Act's geographic (and geopolitical and geo-economic) focus was the Indo-Pacific. "Asia" was mentioned 13 times, but the "Indo-Pacific" was mentioned 67 times in the Act. ARIA's opening line was affirmation of the demographic and economic significance of the Indo-Pacific. The Act was organised on sustained Indo-Pacific lines; namely US "policy and diplomatic strategy in the Indo-Pacific" (Title I), US "security interest in the Indo-Pacific region" (Title II), US "economic interests in the Indo-Pacific" (Title III), and US "values in the Indo-Pacific region" (Title IV). ARIA immediately flagged up how "a geopolitical competition between free and repressive visions of world order is taking place in the Indo-Pacific region"; but that "it is imperative that the United States continue to play a leading role in the Indo-Pacific region" (section 2). The challenge from North Korea and ISIS was seen in the ARIA as secondary, the primary imperative was specified as "countering China" (section 201).

Countering China brought in ARIA's emphasis on existing "alliances"; with the alliance with Japan and Australia described as "vital in the Indo-Pacific region" (section 202). This was complemented by emerging US "partnerships", especially with India. Consequently, section 204 similarly recognized "the vital role of the strategic partnership between the United States and India in promoting peace and security in the Indo-Pacific region"; based on their "joint strategic vision for the Indo-Pacific".

Alliances and partnerships converged in ARIA's call that "the security dialogue between the United States, Australia, India, and Japan is vital to address pressing security challenges in the Indo-Pacific region"; in order "to promote a rules-based order, respect for international law; and a free and open Indo-Pacific" (section 207).

ARIA was clear on US geographic focus for 2019; "working with United States allies and partners to conduct joint maritime training and freedom of navigation operations in the Indo-Pacific region, including the East China Sea and

the South China Sea’ (section 123). This was China-related; given that the South China Sea (mostly claimed by China) and Taiwan (considered a renegade province by China) are considered as “core interests” (*hexin liyi*) for Beijing. In addition, the ARIA called for a “close” security relationship between Taiwan and the United States (section 209), again to Beijing’s discomfort.

ARIA thus seeks explicitly to “reassure” Indo-Pacific allies and partners, but also implicitly and very deliberately to “dissuade” China.

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