

Prospects & Perspectives



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Picture source: The White House, *Flickr*, <<https://www.flickr.com/photos/whitehouse/32041940468/>>.

ARIA and Its Impact upon the Indo-Pacific Region

By *Ming-hsien Wong*

Preface

At the end of 2018, US President Trump signed 13 bills, the “*Asia Reassurance Initiative Act*” (ARIA) being one of the more important. This is the first official document to highlight the US’ commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific region,



that is, the US will safeguard a policy framework and rules-based international order, but it also shows the end of the policy of re-balancing toward Asia begun by the former administration, and signals a new era of US-China power competition within Indo-Pacific region.

In fact, at the end of 2017 Trump published his first annual national security report which emphasized China and Russia as strategic challengers and that Washington must be aware of future national security threats. Consequently, a free and open Indo-Pacific region is of the utmost importance regarding US national security interests and its leadership for the future Indo-Pacific plan.

ARIA shows a US multi-dimensional approach toward the Indo-Pacific, such as security interests, economic engagement and promoting its values, and also shows that the US has put this free and open Indo-Pacific initiative into a strategic arrangement, with clear steps to fulfill its strategic goals in the Indo-Pacific region.

ARIA allows the US administration to incrementally build-up a framework to link its main allies, Japan, Australia and India, and also other important actors, such as South Korea and nations in the Southeast Asia. From Taiwan's perspective, ARIA has additional strategic importance regarding cross-Strait interactions after President Tsai had several times refused to accept Beijing's "1992 consensus," which contends that there is only one China, and that Taiwan belongs to China.

Because of ARIA, which expresses US support for systematic arms sales to Taiwan and boosting diplomatic and defensive interactions with Taiwan, Taipei has become part of this Indo-Pacific security arrangement. The question is whether this US led free and open Indo-Pacific regional arrangement can peacefully develop, since US president Trump faces domestic political problems, and also coming at a key point in the US-China trade war. Further, do nations inside and outside of this Indo-Pacific region have a clear picture of the Indo-Pacific strategy, or do they have different interpretations?

The Origins and Development of ARIA

Initially, ARIA was an initiative by US senator Cory Gardner, Chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, together with senator Ed Markey and Marco Rubio, in December 2018, and which had no obstacles during debates in Congress. Since ARIA has been passed by Congress and signed by



US president, it has become part of US domestic law.

Impact of ARIA on the Development of Indo-Pacific Regional Security Architecture

Firstly, Washington currently pursues a free and open Indo-Pacific region and ARIA provides limited means and ways to cooperate with the nations of the Indo-pacific region.

Secondly, from a US point of view, the main target of this Indo-Pacific strategy is to counter Chinese influence and preserve US dominance in the region. India and Japan, however, have different strategic priorities, and for them the most important concern is to avoid a direct confront with China.

Further, Japan's conceptualization of the Indo-Pacific region differs from the US version, in that the east part of this region includes the western shore of the US, and sees the western extent going beyond the west coast of India to include east Africa.

Thirdly, the main collective organization in this region, ASEAN, also advocates an Indo-Pacific strategy with a different orientation. For example, during the November 2018 East Asia Summit in Singapore, Indonesian President Joko Widodo announced the country's idea of the Indo-Pacific based on the key principles of openness, inclusivity, cooperation, dialogue, respect for international law and ASEAN centrality.

Fourth, countries such as France and the UK will also want to extend its strategic interest into the Indo-Pacific region, and the US also intends to invite those countries to join the US-led Freedom of Navigation exercises in the South China Sea. Further, Japan, together with France and the UK, hold annual meetings between their foreign and defense ministers to establish maritime security cooperation mechanisms in the East and South China Seas.

Fifth, since a US-led Indo-Pacific is a countermeasure toward China's international development strategy, Beijing has engaged a bilateral approach to cooperate with nations within this region in order to break the US' containment policy. For instance, November of 2018, Xi visited the Philippines, and both sides agreed to promote their relations in a strategic partnership. The two



parties have signed a memorandum of understanding on oil and gas development, indicating that China wants close cooperation with individual ASEAN nations.

Conclusion

Today, Taiwan is in a strategic dilemma between the US-led Indo-Pacific strategy and China's cross-Strait policy. Under these circumstances, Taiwan must learn to cope with the US Indo-Pacific strategy and prevent the threats to cross-Strait relations.

a. First, Taiwan must take two-level approach toward this new US-China regional strategic competition. Taiwan must close interact with the US Indo-Pacific framework and adjust its role. On the other hand, Taiwan should also implement its new southbound policy to engage with ASEAN nations in order to widen its international space.

b. Taiwan must carefully examine the contents of ARIA and enhance US-Taiwan relations through diplomatic, defense and economic cooperation. In particular, the ARIA mentions "support for regular arms sale" and enhancing "diplomatic and defense contacts" between Washington and Taipei.

c. After ARIA, US Senator Cory Gardner has engaged in a new initiative called "*Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative Act, TAIPEI ACT.*" Under this, the US has unilaterally designed a legal approach for US-Taiwan, relations including the previous *Taiwan Relations Act, Six Assurances*, and *Taiwan Travel Act*. The Beijing side will speed up its peaceful reunification agenda with Taiwan. Taipei must therefore be careful how to balance the US and China regarding cross-Strait issues.

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