

# Thinking Inertia and Path Dependence in Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States

Yulong Yang

Dalian Maritime University, College of Public Administration and Humanities, Dalian 116026, China  
dmu\_yangyulong@163.com

**Abstract.** With the profound adjustment of the international pattern, the Indo-Pacific region has increasingly become one of the most active regions on the international stage and the focus of American foreign strategy has shifted from Europe to the Indo-Pacific region. By observing its policy documents and diplomatic practice on Indo-Pacific regions, we can find that the US Indo-Pacific strategy presents the thinking inertia, which is manifested by its hard power supremacy, the superiority of values, and the presupposition of imaginary enemies. Meanwhile, the United States emphasizes military means, establishes value alliances, and implements competitive blockade policies, showing its path dependence. The deployment and implementation of the US Indo-Pacific strategy are menacing and pose a long-term challenge and threat to China's development. Based on these tensions, China may summarize and refine the foreign strategic thinking and path of the United States, so as to clarify its intentions and trends before making preventive responses.

**Keywords:** Indo-Pacific Strategy; American Diplomacy; Sino-US Relations; Thinking Inertia; Path Dependence.

## 1. Historical Continuity of American Foreign Strategy

Since the Second World War, the foreign strategy launched by the United States has been adjusted several times. "Foreign strategy refers to the overall planning of sovereign states in their foreign relations for a long time, premised on which all specific foreign policy initiatives are formulated and implemented." [1] As for the Indo-pacific region, after Hussein Obama issued the strategy of "Pivot to Asia" and "Asia-Pacific Rebalance", the United States made corresponding strategic adjustments after considering its national interests and judgment of the international community. Nevertheless, the strategic adjustment only changes the focus and mode of strategic implementation, instead of comprehensively overturning the previous strategy. Shaped by the concepts such as "Manifest Destiny" and "American exceptionalism", the formulation and implementation of American foreign strategy follow its political and cultural traditions with strong historical continuity, which is also reflected in the US Indo-Pacific strategy. Due to the profound adjustment of the international pattern and the rise of emerging economies represented by China, the Indo-Pacific region has become the focus of the international community, with the focus of American foreign strategy shifting from Europe to the Indo-Pacific region. Based on the continuity of American foreign strategy, this paper intends to analyze the thinking inertia and path dependence contained in the US Indo-Pacific strategy, and then try to put forward the countermeasures that China can take, so as to avoid the possible adverse effects of US Indo-Pacific strategy on China in the future.

## 2. Thinking Inertia in the US Indo-Pacific Strategy

### 2.1 Goal of Absolute Security: Hard Power Supremacy

The thinking of hard power supremacy shows that the United States is used to starting from the worst expectation and aiming at absolute security. Therefore, it continuously expands national defense construction and improves military reserves to seek absolute military superiority. "After the end of the Cold War, people pursue peace and harmony, while the United States and NATO were extremely inflated to pursue their absolute security and continuously march five rounds of eastward

expansion, even promoting pan-security, pan-politicization, and pan-militarization in the economy, finance, and culture. [2]

On January 12, 2021, according to some released declassified contents of the *U.S. Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific* (hereinafter referred to as *Indo-Pacific Strategy*), which represents the Indo-Pacific strategy proposed by Donald Trump's administration, the American intention to concern security issues in the Indo-Pacific region based on "presuppositions" was particularly obvious. As for the United States, the proliferation of nuclear weapons, maritime security, terrorism, and unresolved territorial disputes remain the main security issues and sources of conflict [13]. America believes that the government should maintain diplomatic, economic, and military advantages in the Indo-Pacific region to safeguard its security. Joseph Biden's administration also announced its blueprints for the Indo-Pacific strategy in 2022. *Indo-Pacific Strategy* expressed the great concern of the United States for "the regional challenges brought about by China's rise". Biden said that "the United States will strengthen the capacity building of deterrence and anti-coercion, such as more effectively countering the acts of changing territorial boundaries and undermining the maritime power of sovereign States". [14] Besides, he advocated close security ties with allies inside and outside the Indo-Pacific region to strengthen collective military superiority. It can be seen that "they often show a strong or even excessive sense of prevention for potential dangers, which is indicated by their worries about their declining strength or other rising great powers that pose challenges to themselves. Thus, the United States always maintains an intense national defense readiness, requires abundant defense expenditure, and deploys the American conventional and strategic forces around the world".[3] Whether based on "presuppositions" or subjective speculation about the current international situation, the India-Pacific strategies of two US administrations both show the thinking of hard power supremacy, which attempts to pursue the absolute security by ensuring absolute military superiority.

## 2.2 Ideological Identity: Superiority of Values

The superiority of values means that the United States believes their Western liberal democratic values have unparalleled superiority and universality, thus establishing a "moral condescension" in the world by pursuing ideological identity and ultimately serving its interests. "For the former powerful rival, the Soviet Union, the United States adopting the peaceful evolution promoted the division and disintegration of the Soviet Union with the invisible ideological war".[4] After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the End of History put forward by Francis Fukuyama even held that the development of politics and economy always ends with free capitalism, and the road of modernization in the West will eventually dominate the whole world. Although "since the subprime mortgage crisis broke out on Wall Street in 2007, the United States has shown unprecedented signs of recession with both economically declining and politically defects.[5] The United States has not given up being a "city on the top of a mountain" and a "beacon of democracy".

According to the *U.S. Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific* brought forth by the Trump administration, American values should be promoted throughout the region to maintain influence and reduce the influence of the Chinese system. Biden went further on this basis, stressing that the United States will strengthen the shaping of the international system and consolidate the foundation of common values in the next decade. Throughout history, the proportion of ideological contents involved in their two documents is different, but the affirmation of their own value's superiority and to seek ideological identity to achieve practical interests are the common tendencies of the United States to transcend the political divides between the two parties, which have been the vital thinking in American foreign strategy for a long time.

## 2.3 Need to Protect Hegemony: Presuppositions of Imaginary Enemies

The presuppositions of imaginary enemies show that the United States takes hegemonic protection as its need, which results from the law that "the changing strength structure influenced by the ability display of rising countries shapes the leading countries' cognition of their own legitimacy". With

“refusal ability” and “responsibility ability” as indicators, the changing strength structure of regional rising countries should be evaluated to presuppose imaginary enemies. An American scholar, Samuel P. Huntington, wrote in his book *Who Are We? The Challenges to America’s National Identity* that “Sociobiology, individual theory, social characteristic theory, and attribution theory in the late 20th century all support a conclusion, that is, hatred, hostility, need for enemies, individual and group violence, and war are all inevitably rooted in people’s psychological state and environment.[6] It is proven that strong anxiety about cultural nationalism gives “rationality” to the “enemies” from the perspective of binary opposition between subject and object. “After World War II, with the deterioration of US-Soviet relations, the United States regarded the Soviet Union as its “super enemy” in minds and practical actions. Thus, it spared no effort to distort the image of the Soviet Union by all means and construct the so-called “enemy image”.[7] Besides, America not only portrayed the Soviet Union labeling “dictatorship and backwardness” and “red colonialism”, but also insult it with the bad name of “evil empire”. This confrontational presupposition of imaginary enemies is also vivid in the Indo-Pacific strategy.

The Trump administration made it clear that “the United States and its partners on all continents will resist China’s influence”, which is its most anticipated state to promote the Indo-Pacific strategy. The Biden administration emphasized the establishment of extensive ties inside and outside the Indo-Pacific region, but it excludes China to be its ally and partnership, manifesting an obvious intention to presuppose China as an imaginary enemy.

### 3. Path Dependence in the US Indo-Pacific Strategy

#### 3.1 Emphasis on Military Means

Influenced by the thinking inertia of hard-power supremacy, the United States has formed a path dependence that emphasizes military means. Up against the complicated international community and the unpredictable relations between major powers, it may be the most effective and direct solution for the United States to deal with possible international problems by military means. “Since the late 1970s, sea-based and air-based cruise missiles that are nuclear-free with high precision have developed rapidly. In the next 30 years, the United States has great advantages over the Soviet Union and Russia in this field. In the local wars against Iraq, Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Libya, and Syria, the United States has widely used these weapons.[8] In addition to a large-scale arms race with the Soviet Union, the United States has provoked or participated in many local wars since then, so it is even called “the most combative country in world throughout the history”.

The emphasis of the US Indo-Pacific strategy on military means is mainly reflected in three aspects, including military alliance, military investment, and military exercises. In terms of military alliances, American-led military alliances in Indo-Pacific region has been established successively. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) between US, Japan, India, and Australia revived after Trump made it clear that he would completely resist China’s influence in the Indo-Pacific region. In September 2021, the Trilateral Security Partnership (AUKUS) among Australia, the United Kingdom, and the US came into being. US and UK provided nuclear power technology to Australia. Besides, these three countries planned to cooperate in hypersonic and anti-hypersonic capabilities, electronics exhibitions, and other fields. In terms of military investment, the proportion of US military expenditure in GDP is constantly increasing. On June 11, 2022, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin delivered a speech entitled *The Next Step of US Indo-Pacific Strategy* at the 19th Shangri-La Dialogue, which mentioned that “in the draft defense budget for the fiscal year 2023, the Ministry of National Defense applied for 6.1 billion U.S. dollars for the Pacific Deterrence Initiative to promote the missile early warning and capacity building in tracking the Indo-Pacific region”. In terms of military exercises, the American-led exercises tend to be large-scale and frequent. On June 29, 2022, Pacific Rim-2022, the largest multinational and joint-maritime exercise throughout history kicked off, in which 26 countries from 4 continents participated, conducting non-traditional security drills for the

Indo-Pacific region and demonstrating the strong military strength of the United States and its allies. The path dependence of the United States on military means in Indo-Pacific strategy is self-evident.

### 3.2 Establishing a Value Alliance

Affected by the thinking inertia featuring the superiority of values, in order to meet its interests, the United States not only builds allies with countries with ideological consensus and takes collective actions in the form of value alliance, but also demonstrates its existence by exerting its influence in military and economics. “When dealing with relations with other countries, the United States establishes collective security alliances with similar values, promotes the “democratic peace theory”, and regards values as the standard to distinguish allies, opponents, and even adversaries. “Democratic peace theory” holds that a democratic system is the guarantee of peace and there is almost no war between democratic countries. All countries that pursue the same values as the United States are its allies and friends. Meanwhile, the US tries their best to unite with them.” [9]

Worrying about the rising comprehensive influence of China that adheres to a different development model in the Indo-Pacific region, the United States has accelerated to establish a value alliance in the Indo-Pacific region. Based on human rights and democracy, the United States “mobilized other countries on a large scale relying on its power of global dissemination and discourse influence formed by its Western hegemony”.[10] The Trump administration has frequently signed relevant bills concerning China’s human rights, which expressed the attention paid by itself and its allies to the human rights issues in Xinjiang, and even attempted to jointly investigate China’s responsibilities for “undermining the democratic system in Hong Kong”. The Biden administration exported democratic values by attending ASEAN summits and holding bilateral or small multi-border meetings online and offline with Indo-Pacific allies, so as to enhance their cohesion and promote its propositions for American needs.

### 3.3 Implementation of Competitive Blockade Policy

Influenced by the thinking inertia characterized by “presuppositions of imaginary enemies”, the United States tends to adopt the competitive blockade policy in its external path. By setting up imaginary enemies and taking a series of targeted measures, the United States aims to curb the development of imaginary enemies to maintain the international system and regional order dominated by the United States. “As for the containment policy of the United States towards the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in the early days of the Cold War (1947-1950), it mainly revolved around the export control system, embargo, technical sanctions, economic blockade, and sanctions against socialist countries represented by the Soviet Union and Eastern European.” [11]

Following the way of the competitive blockade in its Indo-Pacific strategy, the United States claims to promote the “free and open Indo-Pacific region”, but always excludes China from multilateral mechanisms such as the “Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity”, the “Blue Dot Network”, and “Build Back Better World”. In addition, it expects to provide alternative solutions for infrastructure construction for relevant countries in Southeast Asia through the four-party dialogue mechanism, so as to compete with and hedge China’s “Belt and Road Initiative”. The United States also hopes to carry out the division of labor and cooperation with India, Vietnam, and other countries in the supply chain, playing its substitute role to decouple from China’s industrial chain and forming a restrictive blockade in the high-tech field to a certain extent, so as to further limit China’s progress in chips and other key technologies.

## 4. Future Challenges and China’s Response

Affected by the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, the further deployment and implementation of the US Indo-Pacific strategy may be inadequate, while the Indo-Pacific region is still a major focus of US foreign strategy. Starting from the thinking inertia and path dependence in the US Indo-Pacific strategy, the United States will overall focus on “taking Indo-Pacific as the center, with its traditional

military allies in Asia-Pacific and Europe as the cornerstone, and actively building a compound alliance strategy for China”.[12] Sharing its pressure with the help of allies, the United States promotes “Indo-Pacific NATO” and considers issues in other fields to maintain its leading position in the Indo-Pacific region. As for specific measures, the United States may continue to exaggerate the “theory of China’s threat” in major regional conferences and exert public opinion offensives. Moreover, it uses issues of the South China Sea and Taiwan regions to hype and influence China’s stability surrounding the strategic environment, thus competing to hedge China’s policies through multilateral mechanisms such as the “Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity”. By mastering the US foreign strategic thinking and path continuity, it may help China to clarify the intentions of the United States, judge possible trends, and make preventive responses.

#### **4.1 Maintain Regional Order and Stability Through Peaceful Dialogue**

In the face of American hard-power supremacy and military means, China should not fall into the trap and entangle it. Instead, it should strengthen the five basic principles of peaceful coexistence in China, take mutual respect as the premise, and maintain regional order and stability through peaceful dialogue such as cultural mutual learning. In the future, China should not only continue to care about legitimate concerns within Indo-Pacific countries and respect their reasonable development paths, but also seek common ground while reserving differences in dialogue and properly handling problems and differences. The best example is that China issued *China’s Position on a Political Solution to the Ukrainian Crisis* on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, which resumed diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Besides, China should support and respect the independent formulation of foreign policies by Indo-Pacific countries, and safeguard multilateral mechanisms and regional structures such as the East Asia Summit and the ASEAN Regional Forum based on the principle of ASEAN centrality. In addition, China should actively enhance its influence on civilization communication, and promote in-depth civilization exchanges and mutual learning between China and Indo-Pacific countries, especially ASEAN, thus building inclusive rather than exclusive Indo-Pacific allies.

#### **4.2 Promote Regional Common Prosperity Through Mutual Assistance and Cooperation**

Facing the US presuppositions of imaginary enemies and the implementation of the competitive blockade policies, China should maintain its development strength and always sets foot on the principle of “building new international relations with win-win cooperation as the core”, so as to actively create a partnership network in the Indo-Pacific region and promote the connectivity and cooperation among partners. Through existing multilateral mechanisms such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and the upcoming third International Cooperation Summit Forum of the “Belt and Road Initiative”, we will promote Indo-Pacific countries to increase trust, dispel doubts, and intensify cooperation. Meanwhile, consistently carrying forward the traditional virtue of mutual help, China should join Indo-Pacific countries to cope with the Asian financial crisis, non-traditional security threats, economic recovery in the post-epidemic era, and other challenges. The sense of a shared future should be strengthened to promote the community of shared future represented by China-ASEAN and make progress in mutual help and creating a prosperous future.

### **5. Conclusion**

Climate change, energy shortage, anti-globalization, populism, and other unfavorable factors seriously affect the recovery of the world economy and the stable global order after the epidemic. The Indo-Pacific strategy of the United States seems to have drawn a grand blueprint for the Indo-Pacific region, but its essence is only a means for the United States to maintain its hegemony in the Indo-Pacific region. The US Indo-Pacific strategy seems to be exquisitely designed and influenced by the inherent contradictions of its relatively weak strength and the intertwined interests among its allies.

Thus, it is weak in essence but seemingly competitive. Therefore, China should control its development strength and insist on maintaining regional order and stability through peaceful dialogue. Furthermore, China should promote regional common prosperity through mutual assistance and cooperation, clarify the US intentions, judge possible trends, and make preventive responses by grasping the thinking inertia and path dependence in the US Indo-Pacific strategy.

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