

## **FREE AND OPEN INDO-PACIFIC, FEATURES AND LIMITS OF A MODEL OF REGIONAL ORDER**

by Matteo Dian

### *Introduction*

Great power competition between US and China is at the heart of contemporary international politics. US and China promote two different models of regional order in Asia. This article analyses the Free and Open Indo Pacific (FOIP) as a model of international order promoted by the United States during the Trump and Biden administrations. FOIP is characterized by a specific interpretation of the fundamental normative pillars of the regional order (or primary institutions), such as great power management, sovereignty, international law and individual rights, and multilateralism<sup>1</sup>.

The Free and Open Indo Pacific strategy was first introduced in late 2017 by the Trump Administration and was later detailed through several strategic documents including the National Security Strategy and the National Defence Strategy. FOIP presents several elements of continuity with previous US approaches to the region as well as some innovations. Among the main elements of continuity there is the intention to reaffirm the hegemonic role of the United States in the region, the will to consolidate US led alliances, while deepening the process of security networking initiated in the 2000s, emphasis on the role of free trade, multilateralism, territorial integrity, and inter-

Dipartimento di Scienze Politiche e Sociali, Università di Bologna.

<sup>1</sup> Primary institutions are “deep and enduring social practices generated by evolution rather than by a conscious design”. B. BUZAN, *An introduction to the English school of international relations: the societal approach*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2014, p.16.

national rule of law<sup>2</sup>. The geographical boundaries of the region, further expanded from the previous concept of Asia Pacific, and a clearly competitive approach towards China are the most significant elements of discontinuity.

Key concepts underpinning FOIP are more in line with liberal internationalist tradition than with Trump's "America First" populism<sup>3</sup>. Consequently, the Trump administration struggled to reconcile the promotion of FOIP in Asia, with other more heterodox positions on key issues as environment, trade, international institutions, and Trans-Atlantic relations. The main point of contact with Trump's America First narrative and FOIP was the perception of China as a challenger to the US led international order and its strategic and normative pillars. The Indo-Pacific strategy, on the contrary, appears much more consistent with Biden's approach, which appears broadly in line with the main tenets of US liberal internationalism.

FOIP advances a model of open region stretching from the Pacific Ocean to the US West Coast, rooted in liberal values, US leadership, cooperation among democratic powers and international law. While it has the merit of offering a comprehensive strategic and normative framework for the US engagement in the region, it has also several limits. The lack of a coherent and effective economic pillar, the dissonance between the US and regional perceptions of China, and the necessity to find a compromise with different approaches to multilateralism and the regional preference towards sovereignty and self-determination over individual rights are probably the most relevant limits.

### 1. *Indo-Pacific as a geographic concept.*

Geography is never neutral and objective. On the contrary, as critical geopolitics has highlighted, it is shaped by historical and social

<sup>2</sup> M. DIAN, H. MEIJER, *Networking hegemony: alliance dynamics in East Asia*, in "International Politics", n. 2, 2020, pp. 131-135. B. LOKE, *The United States, China, and the politics of hegemonic ordering in East Asia*, in "International Studies Review", n. 4, 2021, pp. 1208-1229.

<sup>3</sup> L. FORD, *The Trump administration and the 'free and open Indo-Pacific'*, Washington, DC, Brookings Institution, 2020.

discourses as well as by politics and ideology. Ultimately, defining the geographic boundaries of a region entails an inherent form of power<sup>4</sup>. From this perspective, regional orders and regions are not “natural”, nor simply shaped by physical geography or political and economic interactions. Consequently, the spatial definition of a region is influenced by narratives promoted by policy makers and public intellectuals. These narratives are defined by boundaries between friends and enemies, and inner and outer spaces, the identity of a state, the political and social construction of its role and its interests<sup>5</sup>.

Another key distinction is between open and close regional orders. On the one hand, the regional order can be defined in narrow geographical terms and centred around primary institutions promoted by a local great power. In this case East Asia would be defined by Chinese leadership, a set of primary institutions promoted by Beijing, as well as by a Sino-centric geographical understanding of the region. Such a regional order would be close to the American political and normative influence and would entail a high degree of differentiation from the rest of the global order. On the contrary, an open order would include the political, military, and normative influence of external powers such as the US. This would lead to a lower level of normative differentiation together with a stronger integration in global international institutions. An open definition of the regional order entails a very different “mental map” of the region. In the case of FOIP, the mental map proposed by its supporters is particularly broad and inclusive in geographical terms, but rather specific in normative terms.

The Free and Open Indo Pacific Strategy published by the Biden administration defines the Indo-Pacific as “the region, stretching from our Pacific coastline to the Indian Ocean, home to more than half of the world’s people, nearly two-thirds of the world’s economy, and seven of the world’s largest militaries”<sup>6</sup>. The document also underlines

<sup>4</sup> G.Ó. TUATHAIL, J. AGNEW, *Geopolitics and discourse: practical geopolitical reasoning in American foreign policy*, in “Political geography”, n. 11, 1998, pp. 190-204.

<sup>5</sup> G.Ó. TUATHAIL, *Understanding critical geopolitics: Geopolitics and risk society* in “Journal of Strategic Studies”, n. 22, 1999, pp. 107-124.

<sup>6</sup> THE WHITE HOUSE, *The Indo Pacific Strategy of the United States*. Washington DC, 2021.

how the region has become the “world’s centre of gravity” and centre for the economic and security interests of the US<sup>7</sup>.

Both during the Trump and the Biden administration main official documents have stressed the significance of the US role in the region since the XIX century. State Department’s *Free and Open Indo-Pacific. Advancing a shared vision* stated that the US “is and always has been an Indo-Pacific nation”<sup>8</sup>. The 2019 Indo-Pacific Strategy Report of the Department of Defense, states that “the United States is a Pacific nation; we are linked to our Indo-Pacific neighbors through unbreakable bonds of shared history, culture, commerce, and values”<sup>9</sup>.

Ultimately, the Indo-Pacific is essentially a “virtual region” stemming from a narrative based on allegedly common economic and strategic interest as well as values, rather than on a physical conceptualization of geography. Openness in this case also means openness to the US presence and leadership, and integration in the wider US-led international order. The geographic definition of the Indo-Pacific also leads to assign priority to the maritime dimension, that in turn makes the respect of freedom of navigation, the maintenance of trade openness and the protection of sea lines of communication even more important.

Such a broad definition of the region is also functional to involve key democratic allies in the effort to consolidate its main strategic and normative pillars. Nevertheless, as it will be discussed below, this also entails several problems, associated with the high level of heterogeneity that characterizes such a vast region.

## 2. *Great powers’ role, status and legitimacy*

The concept of great power management is central to the analysis of regional or global orders. An international order is not a mere by-product of distribution of power but requires a process of social recognition. Consequently, the status of great power involves rights and

<sup>7</sup> THE WHITE HOUSE, *The Indo Pacific Strategy of the United States*, cit..

<sup>8</sup> US STATE DEPARTMENT, *A Free And Open Indo-Pacific. Advancing a Shared Vision*. Washington DC, 2019.

<sup>9</sup> US STATE DEPARTMENT, *A Free And Open Indo-Pacific. Advancing a Shared Vision*, cit..

responsibilities. According to Bull's original definition, "Great powers contribute to international order by maintaining local systems of hegemony within which order is imposed from above", and "provide a central direction to affairs of the international society as a whole"<sup>10</sup>. More recently GPM has been described as dual in nature: a horizontal dimension, constituted by a process of social recognition, and a vertical dimension embodied by the orchestration of local systems of governance<sup>11</sup>. Ultimately, the status of great power is associated to the capacity to translate asymmetry of power in legitimacy. This, in turn, depends on the capacity to provide solutions to problems of cooperation and coordination in key sectors such as security and economic governance<sup>12</sup>.

FOIP includes a very specific vision of the status and the role of great and middle powers. The US hegemonic role is considered the cornerstone of the regional order and its stability. Preserving both the US material superiority and its capacity to shape the normative pillars of the regional order are therefore considered fundamental prerequisites for FOIP. The declassified *US Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific* issued in 2017 by the Trump administration clearly states that the main aim of the FOIP strategy was to "maintain US strategic primacy in the Indo-Pacific region and promote a liberal order while preventing China from establishing new, illiberal spheres of influence"<sup>13</sup>. The Biden administration has adopted a more implicit wording to express the same concept, referring to the necessity to consolidate and expand the US role in the region.

The consequences of these perceptions are manifold. Firstly, direct and indirect threats to this position are considered as fundamental threats to the US led international order and to US interests. Secondly, this implies a specific position for China. Beijing is recognised as a

<sup>10</sup> H. BULL, *The Anarchical Society. A Study of Order in World Politics*. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 1979, pp. 89.

<sup>11</sup> R. FOOT, *Power transitions and great power management: three decades of China–Japan–US relations*, in "The Pacific Review", n. 30, 2017, pp. 829-842.

<sup>12</sup> E. GOH, *The struggle for order: Hegemony, hierarchy, and transition in post-Cold War East Asia*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013.

<sup>13</sup> US NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL, *U.S. Strategic framework for the Indo-Pacific*. Washington, DC, 2018. [Declassified on January 5, 2021]. <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/IPS-Final-Declass.pdf>

great power but not as legitimate contributor to the regional order. Despite its economic and military resources, its behaviour and its political system lead to a denial of the status of legitimate “order maker” in the region<sup>14</sup>. On the contrary, Beijing is perceived as a direct challenge to the regional order and to the US role.

The 2017 US National Security Strategy defined China as a revisionist power that “wants to shape a world antithetical to US values and interests. China seeks to displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region, expand the reaches of its state-driven economic model, and reorder the region in its favour”<sup>15</sup>. Biden’s perception of China is very different. The *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* states that China “is the only competitor potentially capable of combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to mount a sustained challenge to a stable and open international system”<sup>16</sup>.

This denial of status is in direct contrast with China’s narrative that, especially during the Xi Jinping era, has presented itself as a legitimate great power and a key protagonist of the post war international order<sup>17</sup>. This has relevant policy consequences. Firstly, considering China as a revisionist state blurs the line between China’s legitimate influence in the region and actions that are in direct contrast with the core normative and strategic elements of the regional order. In turn, this makes it more difficult for US policy makers to establish a clear priority between fundamental and negotiable interests. Secondly, this determines a significant disconnect with most regional allies and partners. With the significant exception of Japan, main regional actors tend to recognize China’s legitimate interest in the region and its great power role.

The other fundamental consequence regards the role of US allies and partners. Major allies, such as Japan and Australia, but also India, and

<sup>14</sup> M. DIAN, *Japan, South Korea and the rise of a networked security architecture in East Asia*, in “International Politics”, n. 57, 2020, pp. 185-207.

<sup>15</sup> THE WHITE HOUSE, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*. Washington DC, 2017.

<sup>16</sup> THE WHITE HOUSE, *Interim National Security Strategy Guidance*. Washington DC, 2021.

<sup>17</sup> Y. E. YANG, *China’s strategic narratives in global governance reform under Xi Jinping*, in “Journal of Contemporary China”, n. 128, 2021, pp. 299-313. S.N. SMITH, *China’s “Major Country Diplomacy”: Legitimation and Foreign Policy Change*, in “Foreign Policy Analysis”, n.17, 2021, pp. 112-130.

South Korea, are elevated to the rank of active supporters of the regional order. This has several consequences. Firstly, US led alliances continue to be the cornerstone of the US led regional order. Secondly, it is expected that the process of evolution of the alliances is going to continue if not to accelerate, raising expectations for these countries' contribution to the regional security. Finally, FOIP also assumes that the transition towards a networked security architecture would accelerate in the short and medium term, with the consolidation of mini-lateral and multilateral forms of security cooperation among likeminded countries<sup>18</sup>.

From this perspective, Japan and Australia can be considered as success stories. South Korea and India much less. Japan was the first to elaborate the concept of Free and Open Indo-Pacific and shares the same perspective on China's role. Tokyo considers China as a great power, but not necessarily entitled to shape the rules of the regional order, given its rejection of liberal values and democracy. On the contrary, Japan, who adheres to those values should behave as a key supporter of the regional order. At a more practical level, Japan has gradually abandoned the limits of its post-war pacifism to embrace a much more active security policy, under the banner of the concept of "pro-active contribution to peace" and has significantly upgraded its alliance with Washington<sup>19</sup>.

Australia is the second main regional supporter of the Indo-Pacific model. Canberra shares both the geographical perspective on the region and US values. In the 2000s and early 2010s, Australia sought to reconcile this with a deep economic engagement with China. More recently China's attempts of economic coercion, its aggressive strategies in the South China Sea and the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>20</sup>, led Canberra to consolidate its alliance with Washington, participate to new minilateral agreements such as AUKUS, and to craft a much more muscular defence policy<sup>21</sup>.

<sup>18</sup> M. DIAN, H. MEIJER, *Networking hegemony: alliance dynamics in East Asia*, cit..

<sup>19</sup> A.L. OROS, *Japan's Security Renaissance: New Policies and Politics for the Twenty-First Century*. New York, Columbia University Press, 2017.

<sup>20</sup> Australia proposed an international investigation over the origin of the pandemic. China responded with economic sanctions and boycotts over Australia's export, from agricultural products to raw materials.

<sup>21</sup> N. BISLEY, *Australia's American alliance and the networking of forces in East Asia*, in "International Politics", n. 57, 2020, pp. 208-224.

South Korea's position has been much more nuanced. Since the 1990s, Seoul has recognized the great power status of China, which has become its main trading partner. Moreover, South Korean policy makers are aware that a stable relation with Beijing is necessary to stabilize inter-Korean relations. Consequently, South Korea has sought to avoid participating to initiatives in the realm of security that could openly antagonize Beijing. The election of the conservative Yoon Suk-yeol may partially change this picture, given the will of the new president to align closely with Washington. However, a full alignment with the FOIP vision remains unlikely.

India's position is perhaps the most complex. On the one hand, India shares the apprehension related to China's rise and wishes to see its status recognized internationally. On the other hand, its foreign policy has historically been characterized by non-alignment and promotion of a post-colonial narrative. As a result, New Delhi has sought a position of compromise on FOIP. It has recognized that the concept gave it a renewed centrality and leverage in the relations with the US and its allies. Therefore, it has explicitly linked FOIP to its own "Act East" policy, promoted since 2014. Indian statements have agreed on the objective of promoting a free, open and rules based regional order. But it has also emphasized the necessity of inclusion and the objective of avoiding great power rivalries<sup>22</sup>. This positioning emerged even more clearly after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The Indian government, due to the long-term defence cooperation with Moscow was particularly hesitant in taking a clear position.

Ultimately, there are significant differences regarding the perception of the role of the great powers in the region. Washington and Tokyo see China as a revisionist power and aim to form a coalition led by the democracies of the region to consolidate the existing order. Many other regional partners, however, partially recognize the legitimacy of China's growing role and fear that the American vision will generate excessive competition in the region.

<sup>22</sup> H.V. PANT, A. REJ, *Is India Ready for the Indo-Pacific?*. In "The Washington Quarterly", n. 41, 2018 pp. 47-61. J.P. PANDA, *China as a Revisionist Power in Indo-Pacific and India's Perception: A Power-Partner Contention*, in "Journal of Contemporary China", n. 127, 2021, pp. 1-17.



### 3. *Sovereignty and liberal values in the Indo Pacific*

The relationship between sovereignty and individual rights is a key feature of each international order<sup>23</sup>. Sovereignty is generally conceived, following Max Weber, as a monopoly of legitimate force within a given territory and as non-recognition of any superior political authority. The principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of other states is a direct consequence of sovereign equality and monopoly of violence.

The development of state sovereignty in modern Europe was an essential step for the development of the European international society. From this perspective, the transfer of the concept of sovereignty to the rest of the world in the age of Empires constituted a fundamental step for the expansion of European primary institutions to the rest of the world<sup>24</sup>. This interpretation is challenged by studies informed by a post-colonial perspective, that stressed how the expansion of the European international society manifested itself through colonial exploitation, violence, and the creation of a deeply asymmetrical order<sup>25</sup>.

Most of non-European states obtained their own sovereignty only after a long anti-colonial struggle. Racial equality, equality between states, and political self-determination were at the heart of anti-colonial struggles. Consequently, the preservation of sovereignty and non-interference remain among the key priorities for most post-colonial states<sup>26</sup>. Ultimately, for post-colonial states sovereignty is often conceptualized as independence from great powers, self-determination and

<sup>23</sup> The English School of International relations distinguishes between pluralist and solidarist orders. The firsts are based on the centrality of sovereignty, stability and rights of states. The second are based on the priority of individual rights and justice over stability and sovereignty. B. BUZAN, *An introduction to the English school of international relations*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2014.

<sup>24</sup> H. BULL, A. WATSON, *The Expansion of the International Society*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1985.

<sup>25</sup> S. SUZUKI, *Civilization and empire: China and Japan's encounter with European international society*. London, Routledge, 2009. A. ZARAKOL, *After defeat: How the East learned to live with the West*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010.

<sup>26</sup> A. ACHARYA, *Race and racism in the founding of the modern world order*, in "International Affairs", n.98, 2022, pp. 23-43. Y. ZHANG, *China and liberal hierarchies in global international society: power and negotiation for normative change*, in "International Affairs", n. 98, 2016, pp. 795-816.

formal parity with other states. This has deeply influenced the way in which regional governance is often characterized by “sovereignty confirming” arrangements.

In historical and philosophical terms, the ascent and the protection of human rights stands in direct contrast with the concept of absolute sovereignty. The recognition of human rights as natural rights significantly limits the power of the sovereign over a state’s citizens<sup>27</sup>. An international order rooted in a liberal understanding of international politics assigns priority to individual rights over state sovereignty. Consequently, from this perspective, the international community, guided by democratic great powers, has a duty to protect the human rights beyond the limits of a state’s sovereignty<sup>28</sup>. In this context, interference in another state’s sovereignty is legitimate if aimed at protecting individual rights. This principle has led to the elaboration of the doctrines of humanitarian intervention and Responsibility to Protect (R2P). The latter turned the Weberian/Hobbesian idea of sovereignty to its head, reconfiguring sovereignty as a duty to protect the individual rights of each state’s citizens. These two different perspectives are useful to analyse the models of order promoted by US and China.

In principle, FOIP is a liberal model of regional order, that puts a lot of emphasis on international law and human rights. For instance, the 2019 FOIP vision published by the State Department states that “Americans believe in the vision of a world of open societies and free markets. We believe in fundamental freedom of conscience, religion, speech, and assembly. Our foreign policy is predicated on the belief that the world would be safer and more prosperous if all people were free to achieve their greatest potential within pluralistic systems governed by equal treatment under the law. We believe firmly in an Indo-Pacific composed of open societies and open markets”<sup>29</sup>.

Practically, however, FOIP needs to come to terms with the centrality of sovereignty in Asia and seeks an equilibrium between sovereignty

<sup>27</sup> C. REUS-SMIT, *Human Rights and the Social Construction of Sovereignty* in “Review of International Studies”, n. 27, pp. 519-38.

<sup>28</sup> A. LINKLATER, *The Transformation of Political Community*. Cambridge, Polity Press, 1998.

<sup>29</sup> US DEPARTMENT OF STATE, *Indo Pacific Vision. Advancing a Shared Vision*, Washington, DC 2021. <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Free-and-Open-Indo-Pacific-4Nov2019.pdf>

and liberal values. Both the Trump and the Biden administration have strongly emphasised the necessity to protect sovereignty of regional states. In this case, sovereignty is often interpreted as integrity of national borders, against the Chinese attempts to modify the territorial status quo as well as freedom from economic coercion. Sovereignty differently from the “post-colonial” understanding of the concept is not associated with a pure form of non-interference nor with equal legitimacy of democratic and non-democratic forms of government. On the contrary, the FOIP vision seeks to mediate sovereignty with the limits of the international law as well as democratic and liberal values.

The 2019 DoD report states that “Our vision for a free Indo-Pacific is one in which all nations, regardless of size, are able to exercise their sovereignty free from coercion by other countries. At the national level, this means good governance and the assurance that citizens can enjoy their fundamental rights and liberties”. This awkward balance emerges again when the report states “While we unapologetically represent US values and beliefs, we do not seek to impose our way of life on others”<sup>30</sup>.

The 2021 FOIP strategy argues that “governments can make their own sovereign choices, consistent with their obligations under international law”. The 2021 version puts a clear emphasis on liberal and democratic values stating that the US will “support open societies and ensure Indo-Pacific governments can make independent political choices free from coercion; we will do so through investments in democratic institutions, a free press, and a vibrant civil society[...] [the US] will be a partner in strengthening democratic institutions, the rule of law, and accountable democratic governance”<sup>31</sup>.

In the official documents, the two liberal element of international law and democracy and individual rights are often intertwined. However, they are distinct when it comes to policies. In the Indo-Pacific, in terms of international law, Washington has given priority to the necessity to contrast China’s coercion with reference to the territorial and maritime disputes in the South China Sea. Consequently, upholding freedom of navigation and the respect of UNCLOS, in the face of China’s

<sup>30</sup> US DEPARTMENT OF DEFENCE, *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region*, Washington DC, 2019.

<sup>31</sup> US DEPARTMENT OF STATE, *A Free And Open Indo-Pacific. Advancing a Shared Vision*. cit..

hybrid strategies has been considered as a key objective. The US security policies and the alliance have been working to adapt to this challenge in the last decade. Examples are freedom of navigation operations (FONOPS), capacity building activities with ASEAN partners and the continued commitment to support the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)<sup>32</sup>.

The second dimension regards efforts to defend and promote democracy and individual rights in the region. This aspect highlights the difficulty to promote a liberal model in a region in which only a minority of states adhere to democratic principles. Furthermore, recently several states in the region experienced democratic backsliding, as in the case of the Philippines, if not an outright return to autocracy, as in Thailand and Myanmar. The Trump administration contributed to undermine the credibility of US efforts to promote democracy both with its own actions, culminated with the assault against Capitol Hill on the 6 January 2021, as well as with an open appreciation for strongmen and autocratic leaders in the region, and beyond from Putin and Orban to Duterte and Kim Jong-un.

Biden has returned to locate democratic values at the centre of his foreign policy. Nevertheless, translating this into practice is particularly difficult in the region, given the necessity of competing for influence with China in the midst of an era of democratic regression. The administration has sent important political signals, reaffirming the US support to Taiwan as a reaction to China's coercive actions. Moreover, the promotion of the summit of democracies, held in 2021 represented a clear sight of the will to promote a values-based foreign policy. Nevertheless, two thirds of ASEAN members, including Thailand and Singapore, were not invited to the summit, showing how problematic building a coalition of democracies in the region can be. However, promotion of democracy has not been at the forefront of FOIP priorities, not even rhetorically, despite the frequent references to common values and history. Official documents refer more to the necessity to uproot corruption, promote good governance and freedom of expression than to democracy promotion.

<sup>32</sup> R. O'ROURKE, *U.S.-China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas: Background and Issues for Congress*. Washington DC, Congressional Research Service, 2022.

In conclusion, FOIP should be considered a liberal model of order. Its liberal character contributes to the overall coherence with the broader US foreign policy strategy and helps shaping a clear alternative to China's vision of the region. Nevertheless, many actors in the region either reject liberal values entirely or are oriented towards arrangements that prioritize sovereignty over the centrality of individual rights and democracy.

#### 4. *Contested Multilateralism*

Multilateralism is generally considered a liberal feature of the international order since it expands voice opportunities and the representation of smaller states and it facilitates the creation of mechanisms of dispute settlement based on rules and norms, diminishing the role of power and coercion<sup>33</sup>. All main actors in the region formally adhere to the principle of multilateralism. However, the US, China and especially ASEAN have developed a different understanding of what multilateralism should be, and how it should fit with the other key normative pillars of the regional order. This emerges clearly with the contested nature of the concept of ASEAN centrality<sup>34</sup>.

ASEAN's core principles are respect of sovereignty, non-interference, and acceptance of diversity in terms of political regimes. Therefore, for its member states ASEAN and the multilateral fora associated to it, as the East Asia Summit (EAS) or the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) should have a significant, but neutral, role in the promoting dispute resolution and regional cooperation. As it reaffirmed in the ASEAN Outlook for the Indo-Pacific, ASEAN centrality is functional to minimizing the role of great powers, preserving nonalignment, and isolating member states from the instability of great power competition<sup>35</sup>.

<sup>33</sup> I. HALL, *Diplomacy, anti-diplomacy and international society*, in R. LITTLE, J. WILLIAMS (eds.), "The anarchical society in a globalized world", Basingstoke, Palgrave MacMillan 2006, pp. 13-34.

<sup>34</sup> C. WIRTH, N. JENNE, *Filling the void: The Asia-Pacific problem of order and emerging Indo-Pacific regional multilateralism*, in "Contemporary Security Policy", On line first, 2022, pp. 1-30.

<sup>35</sup> A. ACHARYA, *Why ASEAN's Indo-Pacific outlook matters*, in "East Asia Forum", 2019 I in <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2019/08/11/why-aseans-indo-pacific-outlook-matters/>

References to multilateralism are ubiquitous in the documents that articulate Washington's FOIP vision. Formally, the US position endorses ASEAN centrality in the regional institutional architecture. However, the interpretation of both ASEAN centrality and multilateralism are very different. US documents consider regional multilateralism as functional to preserving US leadership and influence, when local states consider regional multilateralism as an antidote to great powers influence. The DoD 2019 Indo Pacific Strategy Report clearly lists as one of the key objectives "Advancing American influence by competing and leading in multilateral organizations so that American interests and principles are protected"<sup>36</sup>. Furthermore, from the US perspective, multilateralism in the region does not stop with ASEAN centrality or ASEAN related organizations or fora. On the contrary, the emergence of a "networked security architecture" and the creation of mini-lateral and triangular forms of security cooperation are considered functional to regional multilateralism. AUKUS<sup>37</sup> and especially the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) are clear examples of this trend.

This has several consequences. Firstly, there is an inherent contradiction between supporting ASEAN centrality and liberal features of FOIP. As a "values based" model that puts democratic values at the forefront, FOIP does not sit particularly well together with ASEAN centrality, which underlines the role of sovereignty, political pluralism, and non-interference. Second, ASEAN centrality is directly at odds with assigning a key role of protectors of the orders to the main democracies of the region.

Finally, the US perceive regional multilateralism as an instrument to preserve the US led order, consolidate, or expand the US influence, while creating incentives for local states to take side in the competition with China<sup>38</sup>.

This different understanding of the institution of multilateralism leads to excessive expectations on the US side on how far ASEAN member states are willing to take side in a great power competition. Moreover, failing to recognize this difference risks reducing US statements

<sup>36</sup> US DEPARTMENT OF DEFENCE, *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report*. p.16.

<sup>37</sup> AUKUS is pact that promotes military and technological cooperation between US, UK and Australia, signed in 2021.

<sup>38</sup> A.D. BA, *Re- Negotiating East and Southeast Asia*. Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2009.

on “ASEAN centrality” to mere diplomatic etiquette. Finally, ASEAN members see some of the main mini-lateral agreements associated with FOIP such as the Quad and the AUKUS as highly problematic, since they might generate strategic and ideological polarization, putting at risk regional stability.

### *Conclusions*

FOIP as model of regional order is characterized by an open geographical understanding of the region, an attempt to consolidate the US hegemonic role, a significant upgrade of the role of democratic allies and partners as Japan, Australia and India, and by a marked, yet not always consistent, emphasis on liberal values. FOIP has the merit of promoting a coherent idea of US led regional order. Nevertheless, it is also characterized by several limits, that can significantly reduce the US capacity to find legitimacy and consensus in the region.

The most significant are the following. Firstly, it promotes a perception of the Chinese role and status that is often different from those of regional partners. Many of them recognize the legitimacy of Beijing’s great power role in the region, including the possibility for China to promote some elements of its own model of regional order. Negating this possibility, the US tends to blur the difference between core and negotiable interests in the region, assuming that any advance of Chinese presence and influence is necessarily contrary to the stability of the regional order and US interests.

Secondly, FOIP entails a precarious balance between liberal values and state sovereignty. On the one hand, FOIP is based on the centrality of individual rights and freedoms. On the other hand, the region is characterized by a strong role of sovereignty and non-interference as a product of the post-colonial heritage of many regional states.

Finally, FOIP officially seeks to square the circle between “ASEAN centrality” and new minilateral fora such as the QUAD, based on the cooperation between democratic powers. In the region, and especially in Southeast Asia, multilateralism is strongly associated with the attempt to promote an order based on non-interference, sovereignty, and limits to the influence of great powers. The US promotes multilateral cooperation as an instrument to consolidate its own influence, strongly asso-

ciated with values-based diplomacy. In the long run, these limits might undermine the US effort to build consensus around its regional project, thereby making the competition with China more problematic.

**Riassunto** - Questo articolo discute le caratteristiche principali e i limiti più significativi del Free e Open Indo Pacific, modello di ordine regionale promosso dalle amministrazioni Trump e Biden, che si presenta come alternativa al modello sino-centrico proposto dalla Cina. Il FOIP implica un approccio coerente basato sul tentativo di consolidare la lea-

dership regionale americana, la cooperazione tra le democrazie e la centralità del diritto internazionale. Tuttavia, differenti posizioni con alleati e partner locali sul ruolo e lo status della Cina e diverse prospettive sul multilateralismo e sulla sovranità potrebbero minare il tentativo di Washington di costruire consenso per il proprio progetto di ordine regionale.