When the White House released its new *Indo-Pacific Strategy* in February 2022, the first paragraph touched on an important but often ignored theme: “The United States has long recognized the Indo-Pacific as vital to our security and prosperity. Our ties were forged two centuries ago.”

These words show that social context and history are as essential to a country’s geopolitical vision as its relative military power. This article examines US geopolitical discourse in the Indian and Pacific Oceans through the medium of presidential State of the Union (SOTU) and Inaugural Addresses speeches to show that a shared and lived history of geographic affiliation with the Pacific region undergirds much of contemporary US geopolitical thinking. A fuller appreciation for this aspect of US geographic and cultural history can deepen the modern-day strategist’s appreciation for the nuances of US military strategy in the region.
Today, international security discourse often employs the term geopolitics to fulfill a variety of different meanings. However, geopolitics is more than just a fancy word for conversations in smoke-filled chambers among the globe’s capitals. It defines an inherent link between a country’s geographic vision and its political culture and occupies an important place in the field of critical geography. In other words, geopolitics describes how a country thinks about land and about the oceans, how it prioritizes certain geographic space over others. Geopolitics, as a field of study, helps give meaning to overutilized but poorly understood terms, such as bottlenecks, chokepoints, and buffer zones. In the military sciences, this means that power projection is about much more than just the kinetic effect. Power can be analyzed and questioned. Why does a country project power in one region versus another? Why does a country feel the need to project power beyond its borders in the first place? How do that country’s national leaders describe this effort? What discursive memories (e.g., historic claims, cultural practices, religious affiliation) do those leaders link to that power projection to justify it? What do they intend to communicate to their domestic and foreign audiences? This aligns with the fundamental claim from critical geographers that “the geography of the world is not a product of nature but a product of histories of struggle between competing authorities over the power to organize, occupy, and administer space.”

From a theoretical standpoint, this approach forms part of the broader constructivist approach to international relations, which offers “a culturally contingent approach to security studies,” one that argues that a country’s identities and interests are not permanently and objectively fixed by a global system but rather are a product of lived experiences. Unfortunately it is very difficult to find practitioners of foreign policy or scholars applying theories of constructivism or critical geopolitics to contemporary issues, even less so in the US strategic community, where a preference for the numerical and cartographic clarity of military power projection has led to a lesser appreciation for the cultural forces shaping identities abroad. This is unfortunate, because critical geopolitics helps us understand “that the geographies of global politics were neither inevitable nor immutable, but were constructed culturally and sustained politically.” Contemporary global challenges—such as rising nationalism, irredentist territorial claims, and the aggression of nonstate actors—are all better understood when we appreciate the importance of the links between a country’s domestic political culture and its strategic valuation of geographic space.

When examining the geopolitics of countries, there is much to be learned by studying what national leaders say, when they say it, and how they say it. This process of creating language and the rules of its use, often referred to as discourse,
applies to foreign policy and often incorporates elements of a country’s national character, including its culture, history, political ideologies, religion, territorial affiliation, and national myths and narratives, and in many of these, there are inherently territorial references. For example, the popular US legend of “landing on Plymouth Rock” is not just a story about the founding of the United States. It is more importantly a story about a persecuted community’s sense of divine selection, its pilgrimage to a distant land, and its belief that the land was bestowed upon them by a higher power in the interests of supporting a new social, religious, and political life. Indeed, these themes are littered throughout more than two centuries of US geopolitical discourse, including in the enduring and powerful narrative of expansion across the North American continent and beyond.

In the United States, some of the most influential geopolitical discourse can be found in presidential speeches, which broadly emphasize the United States’ predominant position in the world and insist on its inherently benign intent. These speeches also identify “threats and dangers as well as distinguish different countries and regions as friends or adversaries, and finally specify the necessary actions.”

Presidential speeches, and the language of policy debates leading up to them, “afford us a means of recovering the self-understanding of influential actors in world politics [and] help us understand the social construction of the world and the role of geographical knowledge in that social construction.” Relatively regular addresses, such as the annual State of the Union (SOTU) speech and the presidential inaugural address, for example, “offer a consistent source of documentation of priorities of American policy, and the geography of the speeches indicates the regional emphases of American strategy over time.” The geopolitical discourse of the United States shows how US domestic political culture can categorize and prioritize global themes and priorities, consciously elevate the importance of some issues while removing other issues from consideration, and even reclassify global political geography. Consider, for example, US discourse following the September 11 attacks, which cautioned against ungoverned spaces, unstable regimes, and the proliferation of radical ideologies, in the process creating a new term, the Greater Middle East, which became “a long-term geopolitically imagined region.”

An examination of nearly two centuries of presidential inaugural and SOTU addresses reveals consistent emphasis of key themes regarding US geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific region. These themes included the benign nature of early US territorial expansion, the importance of US vital interests in sea-based commerce, the mutual benefits of economic neoliberalism, and the justification for a continuous military presence beyond US delimited borders to prevent disorder and instability. Inaugural and SOTU addresses are political acts that form a two-way chan-
nel between the American people and US foreign policy. First, these speeches demonstrate to the American masses how US geopolitical action abroad reinvigorates enduring narratives in domestic American political culture, including the sense of a divinely selected people, the unique nature of the American pilgrimage to distant lands, and the power of the American liberal experiment. Conversely, these addresses also convey important domestic American narratives abroad, which scholars have long insisted help undergird the moral framework of US geopolitics. Some argue these themes arose from the bipolarity of the Cold War, others locate it earlier in the twentieth-century dawn of liberal internationalists such as Woodrow Wilson, and yet others critique its insistence on American innocence. In other words, this relationship is two-way: US values support US geopolitics, and US geopolitical action abroad reinvigorates Americans’ belief in their own values. While there are certainly other factors involved, including concerns about realist-style power differentials, these concerns were and are built atop historic layers of understanding and serve a variety of purposes.

**US Presidents and the Geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific**

The United States, at a very early stage, “built its strategic and economic footprint primarily across the Pacific Ocean rather than the broader Indo-Pacific region,” beginning with the 1784 sailing of the Empress of China from New York to Canton (now Guangzhou). This voyage, predating the western North American expansion of the United States, presaged the development of a robust American geopolitical tradition in which US identity was defined by its vital interests inherently linked to the commerce of the Pacific Ocean, including commerce with China and other Asian powers, the fur trade along the northwest coast of North America, and the whaling industry. Yet westward expansion and the acquisition of new territory was a sensitive topic with the American public, often requiring US presidents to address them directly in terms that embraced the narrative of exceptional civilization, benign intent, and mutual benefit for all. During his second inauguration in 1805, for example, Thomas Jefferson defended the 1803 purchase of the Louisiana Territory by asking rhetorically, “is it not better that the opposite bank of the Mississippi should be settled by our own brethren and children, than by strangers of another family? With which shall we be most likely to live in harmony and friendly intercourse?” Jefferson, who had also funded the Lewis and Clark Expedition to the Pacific coast beginning in 1803, became one of the first in a long line of US presidents who would seek to assuage Americans’ and foreigners’ concerns about growing US expansionism while simultaneously pursuing increasingly expansionist westward geopolitics by the use of a specific
form of geopolitical discourse that saw the United States as the objective arbiter of territorial and maritime identity.

A key tool of geopolitical practice—military forward deployment—soon became a normal method of implementing the US geopolitical vision across the Pacific Ocean. In 1817, the first US naval vessel was dispatched to the Pacific, and in 1821, the Pacific Squadron was formed to patrol the waters near South and North America as well as the Hawaiian Islands, a move James Monroe defended in both his Second and Third Annual Messages as necessary for the protection of US commerce. In 1825, John Quincy Adams defended the naval deployment off the Pacific coast of South America during the wars of liberation from Spanish rule, arguing that “an unsettled coast of many degrees of latitude forming a part of our own territory and a flourishing commerce and fishery extending to the islands of the Pacific and to China still require . . . the protecting power of the Union.” In 1835 the United States formed the East India Squadron.

The mid-nineteenth century was a pivotal moment for US geopolitics, not just in the acquisition of territory across the North American continent but also by setting the stage for the application of geopolitical language to assert claims throughout the Pacific Ocean as both inherently moral but also vital for US commerce. In March 1845, newly inaugurated president James Polk defined his “duty to assert and maintain by all Constitutional means the right of the United States to that portion of our territory which lies beyond the Rocky Mountains.” Highlighting the increasing weight of the American population, Polk noted that “our people, increasing to many millions . . . are already engaged in establishing the blessings of self-government in valleys of which the rivers flow to the Pacific.” He further insisted, “The jurisdiction of our laws and the benefits of our republican institutions should be extended over them in the distant regions which they have selected for their homes.” Initial commercial concerns over the protection of whaling and fur trading ceded some ground to the strong need for guano as fertilizer. Guano’s rising importance by the mid-nineteenth century launched a prospectors’ assault across the Pacific Ocean and nearly led to a US war against Peru to seize large guano deposits on islands off the Pacific country’s coast. However, when in 1850, Millard Fillmore urged the Peruvian government to remove restraints on guano trade, announcing that such a move would “promote [Peru’s] own best interests, while it will afford a proof of a friendly disposition toward [the United States],” he went beyond simply seeking guano for US agriculture. By linking the foreign policy decisions of another country to the economic prosperity of the United States, he extended the umbrella of US vital interests deep into South America. He took a similar approach regarding two important, independent Pacific Islands at the time: the Kingdom of Hawai‘i and Japan.
In his 1851 SOTU address, Fillmore provided several reasons for US recognition of the independence of the Hawaiian Islands: their importance as a stopover for US whaling ships, but also their strategic location along the trade route to Asia. Enduring US ideological support for independence movements from colonial oppressors resulted in a somewhat counterintuitive demand. While he vocalized a US demand that Hawai‘i “should not pass under the control of any other great maritime state,” implying that it also should not establish close relations with competitor states, he also enthused that Hawai‘i should “remain in an independent condition, and so be accessible and useful to the commerce of all nations.” Most importantly, Fillmore added the following reason for US concern: “the importance of these considerations has been greatly enhanced by the sudden and vast development which the interests of the United States have attained in California and Oregon.” He reiterated the importance of westward expansion two years later, insisting that “Our settlements on the shores of the Pacific have already given a great extension . . . to our commerce in that ocean,” and he thus announced intention “to open the opposite regions of Asia to a mutually beneficial intercourse.” In foreshadowing the historic visit of Commodore Matthew Perry to Japan, Fillmore again framed the image of US geopolitics in innocence and mutually beneficial outcomes, saying the United States’ constitutional system “excludes every idea of distant colonial dependencies” and announcing that while he was sending Perry in an armed flotilla to seek from Japan “some relaxation of the inhospitable and antisocial system which it has pursued for about two centuries,” he assured the Japanese government “that the expedition is friendly and peaceful.”

Pres. Ulysses S. Grant spoke in 1873 of the nearly divine nature of the United States’ westward expansion, citing not just the linking mechanisms of steam transit and telegraph but also framing the process as one step in which “our Great Maker is preparing the world, in His own good time, to become one nation, speaking one language, and when armies and navies will be no longer required.” Again, context matters. Grant was speaking just a few years following important developments in the United States’ Pacific identity, including California statehood (1850), the acquisition of the territory of Alaska (1867), and the linking of the North American continent by railroad (1869). Geopolitics bore a stronger influence on US Pacific identities beginning in 1890 with the publication of Rear Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan’s influential book, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History: 1660–1783*, which provided a maritime-focused corollary to British geographer Halford Mackinder’s vision in which the Eurasian landmass was at the heart of future geopolitics. For a political leader such as Pres. Theodore Roosevelt, Mahan’s book was “more than a naval classic. It was a playbook for a dynamic country that had just encountered the limits to its growth. The United
States must seize an empire. And if it had to carve it out of existing empires, so be it.” Mahan confidently asserted that “The profound influence of sea commerce upon the wealth and strength of countries was clearly seen long before the true principles which governed its growth and prosperity were detected.” He emphasized the vital role maritime influence played in international trade and hinted at US maritime identity as “so situated that it is neither forced to defend itself by land nor induced to seek extension of its territory by way of land.”

World War II further set the stage for the United States’ global maritime presence in the second half of the twentieth century but also resulted in a fascinating phenomenon important for understanding contemporary US geopolitics today. The war created a massive US-centric logistical highway and the need to cross the enormous Pacific Ocean meant the need to control and administer small islands, a project the US Navy Seabees expanded to support. Members of the organization “swelled to nearly two hundred thousand men and built hundreds of Pacific bases, from Aitape to Zamboanga. Construction workers from places like Boston and San Francisco found themselves hauling dirt on Nukufetau, Kwajalein, Sasavele, and Mios Woendi.” Following the war, the US military developed the Strategic Island Concept in 1959, which called for “a stockpiling of islands for contingency use of the U.S.” The Indian Ocean region slowly became the subject of intense US geopolitical mapping as the Cold War peaked, and it is worth exploring the evolution of Naval Support Facility Diego Garcia as a classic example of the geopolitical project, which does not just seek to project power but also to rewrite the identity of places abroad under a new narrative. While no US president ever mentioned Diego Garcia in their inaugural or SOTU speech, given how small of an issue it may have been in the grand scheme of issues, the background years leading up to a press conference comment made by Pres. Gerald Ford in August 1974 demonstrate expanded geopolitical effort in the Indian Ocean and the attendant focus on force projection and prolonged military postures. Ford’s comment was not random but rather the outcome of thorough debate within the US strategic community about the utility of an island in the Indian Ocean, which reveals as much about the geopolitical process as its motivations.

**Power Abroad: Diego Garcia as a Case Study**

The discourse in a multitude of declassified documents regarding the establishment of Diego Garcia reveals similar themes found in the speeches of US presidents: the benign and modest nature of the US military presence abroad; the inherent danger to the free, neoliberal world of unstable, volatile, disordered space (as compared to stable, peaceful, ordered space); and the concerning prospect that other large powers might dominate open geographic space. These themes were
channeled into ever-stronger justifications that led to a gradual expansion of the military presence in Diego Garcia, including the administration of its distant population.

Although the US Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) in 1962 expressed interest in alternate fueling and logistical routes due to concerns about the availability of overflight and staging areas across Africa and the Middle East, the primary justification for Diego Garcia was to establish a communications platform as expressed in a 1963 telegram from the US Department of State to the US Embassy in London. The demand for anything more was limited, and even more expansive plans qualified a possible future facility as “austere” and “modest.” In March 1967, for example, the US Navy considered the possibility of “building an austere naval fueling facility on Diego Garcia” to fuel transiting US aircraft carriers. Support was weak, however, and by the 1966 UK Defence Review, the US position simply asserted an interest that the United Kingdom maintain a credible presence “East of Suez” and added, “At one time the US was considering construction of an austere communications station and supporting facilities on Diego Garcia; however, this is not the case at this time.”

A noticeable shift occurred in July 1967 that began nearly a decade of strong internal debate about the justification for a military presence in Diego Garcia. The JCS pressed harder for a permanent logistical presence in the Indian Ocean by beginning to employ the geopolitical discourse common in more than 100 years of presidential speeches. Perhaps unknowingly echoing John Quincy Adams’ warning of “unsettled coasts” along the South American Pacific shoreline, the Joint Chiefs cautioned, “Political instability of states along the Indian Ocean littoral is likely to continue for many years.” They continued, “Soviet Union infiltration of and pressure on those states are likely to increase, and it can be expected that Communist China as well will increase its efforts to exert influence upon them.” In October 1967, then-Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara told military leaders that he did “not see a clear requirement for the base . . . Current intelligence suggests no requirement for such an extended and uninterrupted show of force.” However in April 1968, the JCS reengaged McNamara, cautioning that the:

... accelerated British withdrawal east of Suez will create a power vacuum which has the potential to generate situations inimical to US national interests and long-range security. The Soviet Union and the Chinese People’s Republic (CPR) can be expected to capitalize on the opportunities made available through the British withdrawal ... Predominance over the natural resources of the Indian Ocean area or dominating influence over the governments of the surrounding land areas by the USSR could have a serious impact on the economic and strategic positions of the United States and its
The Indian Ocean is a critical, strategic area from which large portions of both the USSR and CPR can be targeted from a submarine. (emphasis added)

In June 1968, Pentagon leadership still resisted, but the narrative of the threat of Soviet and Chinese Communist contest in vacuum-like geographic conditions was having its desired effect. The Pentagon approved a “modest” facility but also pointed out that an expansion of Diego Garcia “would also demonstrate to concerned leaders that we are not totally uninterested in the area.” In other words, the value of a lingering military presence had moved beyond the tangible operational benefits and was taking on the more transcendental importance of indicating to the world the United States was geopolitically “rewriting” a space as belonging within its ambit of interest and within its system of rules and norms. By implication, such a space would be off-limits to “revisionist” powers seeking to impose a separate set of rules and norms. The argument continued in November 1970 when the US Strike Command Commander wrote in a memo to the JCS, “The Soviet naval presence in the Indian Ocean has already seriously undermined US influence in this important area. This presence should be regarded as the cutting edge of a concerted, determined Soviet effort to dominate the Indian Ocean littoral; and to destroy the US position in this area.” Interestingly, this view assumed an already-extant “US position” in the Indian Ocean region, despite the lack of significant development of Diego Garcia up to that point. This lack of prior US presence was raised as a point of concern in July 1969 by then–Indian Minister of External Affairs Dinesh Singh, who warned that the proposal to expand Diego Garcia “would bring the US into a new area where it had no present obligations and where competition with other major powers would be the inevitable result.”

By early 1974, the United States and United Kingdom had agreed on plans to expand Diego Garcia, given “the need to check Soviet naval expansion in the Indian Ocean and to assure that vital Indian Ocean sea lanes remain open.” However, the continued perception of a disconnection between threat and response, and the sense that there was an apparent inevitability to a permanent facility in Diego Garcia, elicited some concern from congressional members. Consequently, Chairman of the Senate Committee on Armed Services John C. Stennis (D–MS) sought an explanation from Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger about the real reasons for an expanded presence in Diego Garcia, and Schlesinger’s reasons listed the standard discursive set of US geopolitical preoccupations, such as protecting maritime trade routes (in this case oil), but also the importance of projecting “our intention to continue to play a role in the area.”

A vital aspect of geopolitics is managing people as well as territory. In the case of Diego Garcia, the recrafting of political space and human communities began
in earnest in March 1964 when, “the [British] Foreign Office clearly indicated [to US officials] that control over the Chagos Archipelago (including Diego Garcia) should be transferred [from Mauritius] in such way as to minimize substantially or remove the possibility that use of the islands could be hampered by external pressures for self-determination.” US planners in 1967 referenced the value of this agreement by noting that “a facility on Diego Garcia would be unlikely to embroil the United States in exclusively local problems, because of its isolated geographic location and the political arrangements which the British have made for the islands of the British Indian Ocean Territories.” Discussions in September 1968 finally arrived at the recommendation to relocate the indigenous population of Diego Garcia to some other location, which was briefed to the Secretary of State in June 1969 as a British obligation. While there was a heavy debate at times throughout these years, the eventual thrust of discussions leaned toward developing a strong justification for a continuous US presence. These justifications allowed Gerald Ford to defend the expansion during an August 1974 press conference, saying “I favor the limited expansion of our base at Diego Garcia. I don’t view this as any challenge to the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union already has three major naval operating bases in the Indian Ocean. This particular proposed construction, I think, is a wise policy.”

Diego Garcia in the years following its adoption as a strategic site has since entered the lexicon of presidential geopolitical themes, from Ronald Reagan’s 1984 remarks marking the first anniversary of the Grenada rescue mission to Bill Clinton’s 1996 mention of Diego Garcia during a Veteran’s Day ceremony to George W. Bush’s 2006 praise of Diego Garcia’s refueling role in antiterror operations during the inauguration of the US Air Force Memorial. These remarks were not tactical comments but rather lofty language linking the ideas of US geopolitical themes—exceptionalism and civilizational greatness—with the presence and role of a small island chain in the Indian Ocean.

**Contemporary Geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific**

The *Indo-Pacific* is a vague term, with its geographic and ideological imperatives differing across world capitals and strategic communities. As Australian security scholar Rory Medcalf has said, “It sounds like too much yet not enough, two adjectives without a noun, the sea without the land, Asia without its continent, a conflation of two oceans, each vast enough to be a region in its own right.” In one set of definitions, the Indo-Pacific has been the recipient of the geopolitical project of larger states. For example, the term *Southeast Asia* is a Western military construct of World War II vintage that grouped Asian states together in a specific way. Contemporary US geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific builds on two
centuries of US engagement in the region in which US territorial and cultural identity gradually expanded to link the North American continent to the broader Pacific region, allowing the United States to claim alternate geopolitical identities for the region. These claims, however, were not without opposition.

German geopolitical geographer Karl Haushofer challenged the US claim to Pacific-ness in the early decades of the twentieth century by arguing that the true Indo-Pacific identity of the United States had been the indigenous communities of the North American continent, whereas the contemporary United States reflected the success of colonial, Anglo-American people. He also argued in 1924 that “the union of the Indian and Pacific Oceans is more natural than their separation,” while others agreed, suggesting that contemporary divisions of the Indo-Pacific bear “the legacy of colonial and anticolonial politics along the fault lines of natural and social spaces.” While these divisions framed US strategic discourse on the region, including geopolitical terms such as Southeast Asia, South Asia, East Asia, as well as Asia-Pacific, many US presidents insisted instead that “America, a nation of the Pacific Basin, has a very vital stake in Asia,” and would pursue “a Pacific doctrine of peace with all and hostility toward none” to “join with new and old countries of that great Pacific area in creating the greatest civilization on the shores of the greatest of our oceans.” While this reads like a piece of modern Indo-Pacific diplomacy, the president was Gerald Ford, speaking in 1975 on the occasion of the 34th anniversary of the Pearl Harbor attacks in Hawai’i. In that address, he echoed a theme rooted in the heart of US geopolitical discourse toward the countries and cultures of the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

Asia-Pacific was the preferred US term for some time, a “once-useful but now outmoded idea,” finding its way into official US geopolitical discourse. In 2002 a senior US Department of State official emphasized the importance of “having forward deployed forces that foster regional stability and security throughout the Asia-Pacific,” while in 2006, then-National Security Advisor Steven Hadley affirmed, “By geography and history, America is an Asia-Pacific power.” In three SOTU addresses, Pres. Barack Obama said, “We’ve made it clear that America is a Pacific power,” “. . . we will continue to focus on the Asia-Pacific, where we support our allies, shape a future of greater security and prosperity,” and “[i]n the Asia-Pacific, we are modernizing alliances while making sure that other nations play by the rules.” The term reflected a formal policy framework through the first decade and a half of the twenty-first century, until 2015 when it morphed into the Indo-Asian Pacific, indicating a concerted effort to center India into a new geopolitical vision that looked further west than the United States had ever previously done. More current presidential geopolitical discourse carried forward this India-centric vision, with Obama’s White House in 2014 and 2016 offering some
of the first official mentions of the Indo-Pacific in fact sheets related to his visits to Japan and India.53

The forward presence evidenced so visibly during the debates behind Diego Garcia continues today as a fundamental element of the Indo-Pacific but also as part of a geopolitical vision that rewrites global space and sovereignty. What Diego Garcia and facilities like it represent is the projection of sovereign security concerns beyond delimited borders, which is a fundamental geopolitical practice. The 2010 and 2014 Quadrennial Defense Reviews, for example, are filled with descriptions and justifications for the forward presence of US military forces.54 This builds into the geopolitical process of mapping the world of security threats and interlinks US national security with activities abroad. Multiple presidents have identified this priority generally and specifically to the Pacific region. In 2008, George W. Bush emphasized that building “a prosperous future for our citizens also depends on confronting enemies abroad and advancing liberty in troubled regions of the world.”55 President Obama in two addresses highlighted that the United States takes action abroad in Afghanistan, Iraq, and on global issues such as nuclear disarmament “because our destiny is connected to those beyond our shores,”56 and in 2013 he asserted, “America will . . . renew those institutions that extend our capacity to manage crisis abroad, for no one has a greater stake in a peaceful world than its most powerful nation.”57 Pres. Donald Trump, in November 2017, spoke on the Indo-Pacific in Vietnam and declared that “America stands as a proud member of the community of nations who make a home on the Pacific. We have been an active partner in this region since we first won independence ourselves.”58

**Conclusion**

Geopolitics is a popular term these days, and it can be found everywhere, from the public pronouncements of heads of state to the strategic doctrines of military officials to policy articles from think tanks. Yet, it is a term that holds much greater theoretical weight and can offer a richer explanation of how and why states behave the way they do. In doing so, it specifically addresses a murky and often overlooked area of security studies: the geographic identity of a state. Rather than solely focusing on power, states define their foreign relationships at least partly through the geographic nature of their histories, narratives, myths, and cultural phenomena, and these themes frequently appear in geopolitical discourse. Indeed, what is often referred to as revisionist state behavior can be seen as the assertion (or reassertion) of a state’s geopolitical vision, one that projects that state’s vital interests further beyond, or more deeply tied to, its geographic periphery. This
vision very often leads to clashes with the competing geopolitical practices of nearby states, examples of which are numerous today.

In the context of US geopolitical identity, we can understand much by examining the specific geopolitical discourse of US leaders as well as the shifting relationship between the United States and global territorial space. An adequate analysis of the United States’ current Indo-Pacific strategy must understand that it, too, is built atop layers of geopolitical imaging brought on by momentous events such as the Monroe Doctrine of 1821, the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, the linking of the continent by railroad in 1869, the annexation of Hawai’i in 1898, the Open Door Note of 1899, and other policy documents which sought to project vital US interests westward and beyond its continental shores. All these efforts and others were noted, qualified, announced, and justified by generations of US presidents who, sometimes unknowingly, were conducting a fundamental function of foreign policy: to mediate the relationship between the United States’ domestic identity and its foreign behavior. In doing so, these presidents underlined key elements of US identity, such as benign exceptionalism, civilizational greatness, and the mutual benefit of a liberal model.

Today, the Indo-Pacific region is a vast geographic space of varied histories, diverse cultures, and a mixed set of states engaged in different forms of competition and cooperation. Although it is common (and easy) to view the Indo-Pacific as simply the next theater of contest between the People’s Republic of China and the United States, an inevitable Thucydides’ Trap in which military power trumps history and identity, it is important to understand that US geopolitics in the region predate the current power structure by nearly two centuries and, thus, are motivated by far deeper geopolitical inclinations. It is equally important to appreciate that the Indo-Pacific is a region with its own identity, history, and human communities, all of which will need to remain relevant when discussing the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific in the twenty-first century.

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Notes

23. Immerwahr, How to Hide an Empire, 64.


45. Medcalf, Indo-Pacific Empire, 3, 5.

46. Medcalf, Indo-Pacific Empire, 67.


49. Medcalf, Indo-Pacific Empire, 9.


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