

Political Leaders and Public Diplomacy in the Contested Indo-Pacific

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Summary

Public diplomacy practice is intensifying across the Indo-Pacific as global actors compete to keep pace with the emerging geopolitical realities of a contested world order. China's rise is the dominant feature. It comes as the United States retreats from global leadership, further heightening the sense of uncertainty in the region. Amid this strategic re-ordering, competition to influence narratives, set political agendas and frame the rules of a changing order is intense. The stakes for public diplomacy could not be higher and the implications for political leaders are significant. This article examines the role of Indo-Pacific political leaders through the lens of public diplomacy. While there are significant differences in approach, findings suggest that the imperative for political leaders to inform, engage and influence public audiences increasingly lies in the desire to shape the narrative and thus the nature of a regional order that will be favourable for their national interests.

Keywords

public diplomacy – political leadership – Indo-Pacific – strategic narrative – power – influence

Introduction

Political leaders have become increasingly relevant in shaping and contesting narratives of power and influence in the twenty-first century. Nowhere is this

more evident than in the Indo-Pacific region.¹ China's rise is the region's dominant feature. Under President Xi Jinping's leadership, China offers the narrative of a 'New Era' of development for the region, marked by an ambitious agenda of 'absolute control at home and unprecedented influence worldwide'.² The very notion of the Indo-Pacific, advocated by other powers in the region, notably Japan, India and Australia, working in quartet formation with the United States, aims to counterbalance China's influence. Underpinned by values of openness, freedom and a commitment to international law, this is a narrative that has captured the discourse of strategic publics across the region. Caught in the middle of the emerging contest, South-East Asian leaders abide by their well-established preference for collective rather than unilateral leadership. Pressure is building on the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) to cement the Indo-Pacific narrative further, although it is not yet clear whether and how ASEAN leaders will respond.

This article argues that political leaders within the Indo-Pacific are increasingly turning to strategic public diplomacy as they seek to define and shape the narrative of regional order that will be most conducive to their national interests. At first glance, there is nothing new here, as political leaders have long been viewed as instruments of public diplomacy. However, this contribution reveals the contemporary significance of political leaders as agents of public diplomacy in times of change and contest. In particular, it draws attention to leaders from across the emerging Indo-Pacific, who, unlike leaders of the West, have not typically been the subject of such study. As the pendulum of political and economic power shifts towards this vast and diverse geopolitical construct, Indo-Pacific leaders will be increasingly responsible for steering critical policy agendas, institutions and norms that hold regional and even global significance.

Three emerging leadership dynamics are visible within the currents of Indo-Pacific strategic re-ordering and provide the focus of this study. They are:

1. China's great power leadership under President Xi underpinned by the mission to 'seek happiness for the Chinese people and rejuvenation for the Chinese nation';³

1 The Indo-Pacific region was defined in Australia's 2017 *Foreign Policy White Paper* as 'stretching from the eastern Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean connected by Southeast Asia, including India, Northeast Asia and the United States'.

2 Rowan Callick, 'The Neighbourhood in a State', in Caitlin Byrne and Lucy West (eds), *The State of the Neighbourhood* (Brisbane: Griffith Asia Institute, 2018), p. 11.

3 Xi Jinping, 'Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in all Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a

2. the complementary approaches of the leaders of Japan, India and Australia, working cooperatively to establish a 'free and open Indo-Pacific' as a counterbalance to China's great power dominance; and
3. the institutional consensus-based approach of South-East Asian leaders working through ASEAN.

Variations in approach are evident, yet findings suggest that the imperative for political leaders to inform, engage and influence public audiences increasingly lies in the desire to shape narratives in the contest for power and influence within the region. For these actors, the deeply political and strategic nature of public diplomacy is of relevance. Indeed, as Donna Oglesby observes:

Public diplomacy actors do not lay the good intentions pavement for a universal civilization. They recognize that in a pluralistic international society, contesting ideas drive agendas, social movements, revolutions and policy choices. Their task, with varying levels of power and persuasiveness, is to influence the problem definition and therefore the political outcome of the issues under debate.⁴

A broader study of leadership across the region might consider other examples, such as the 'people-centred' model advocated by South Korea's President Moon Jae-In, the enigmatic leadership of North Korea's Supreme Leader Kim Jong-Un, the flawed leadership example set by 2001 Nobel Peace Prize laureate and now Myanmar State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, or even the populist style of Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte. However significant these and other examples might be for the study of leadership and public diplomacy, they have limited bearing on the emerging strategic order of the Indo-Pacific that forms the focus of this study, and are therefore outside the scope of discussion.

Political Leaders and Public Diplomacy

Political leadership and public diplomacy go hand in hand. In today's hyper-connected world, political leaders are increasingly recognized as the physical

New Era', speech delivered to the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (18 October 2017).

4 Donna Oglesby, 'The Political Promise of Public Diplomacy', *Perspectives*, vol. 4, no. 1 (March 2014), available online at: <http://www.layalina.tv/publications/the-political-promise-of-public-diplomacy-by-donna-marie-oglesby/>.

embodiment of the state that they represent: its values, policies, institutions and aspirations. They play an instrumental role in communicating and projecting the image of that state to global public audiences. Their presence, rhetoric and interactions with others, especially with other leaders, foreign media academics and diaspora, as well as their behaviour — online and in real time — can shape public perceptions towards their nation, its citizens and policies.

In international relations, it is widely accepted that ‘leadership matters most at times of crisis, strategic vulnerability or when international conditions are fluid.’⁵ The role that political leaders play to consolidate collective action in the global sphere, ‘providing solutions to common problems [...] and mobilizing the energies of others to follow these courses of actions’⁶ requires a sophisticated skill set. Arguably, leaders draw increasingly on the skills of public diplomacy, the broad aims of which are to ‘understand cultures, attitudes and behaviours; build and manage relationships; and influence thoughts and mobilize actions to advance [their] interests and values.’⁷

Unlike professional diplomats, political leaders are beholden to their domestic constituencies, even when engaging on the world stage. The pressure to maintain popular support and ‘face’ at home holds true for leaders representing democratic and authoritarian nations alike.⁸ At the same time, the ubiquitous nature of global media means that the actions and words of leaders at home can play a key role in shaping the perceptions of global publics and driving wider strategic discourse — even when this is not intended. The intersection between domestic and external audiences creates notable tensions for the political leader, but aligns to public diplomacy’s Janus-faced orientation.⁹ Wherever political leaders find themselves, whether at the podium of the United Nations (UN) General Assembly or on the floor of a local factory at home, as long as they are in public view, they are increasingly considered to be on the ‘world stage’.

5 Katherine Morton, ‘Political Leadership and Global Governance: Structural Power versus Custodial Leadership’, *China Political Science Review*, vol. 2 (2017), p. 477.

6 Nannerl O. Keohane, *Thinking About Leadership* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), p. 19.

7 Bruce Gregory, ‘American Public Diplomacy: Enduring Characteristics, Elusive Transformation’, *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, vol. 6, nos. 3-4 (2011), p. 352.

8 Chung-in Moon and David Plott, ‘A Letter from the Editors’, *Global Asia*, vol. 13, no. 3 (September 2018).

9 For further discussion of public diplomacy’s domestic dimension, see Ellen Huijgh and Caitlin Byrne, ‘Opening the Windows on Diplomacy: A Comparison of the Domestic Dimension of Public Diplomacy in Canada and Australia’, *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, vol. 12, no. 4 (2012), pp. 395-420.

The extent to which political leaders have embraced the public diplomacy dimension of their role is inconsistent. For some, the fit is not a natural one, but evolves over time. Others bring a personal charisma and a natural affiliation for engaging public audiences, including through social media. Regardless, the reality of today's global diplomatic environment, including an increasing emphasis on summitry — diplomacy conducted at the highest levels of political authority — means that most political leaders are unable to escape the public diplomacy dimensions of the leadership role. This is especially so for leaders across the Indo-Pacific, who are acutely aware of how their interactions 'will be read by competitors and mass publics'.¹⁰ Indeed, despite the reservations of professional diplomats, political leaders are more regularly in the public view — communicating, negotiating and advocating national interests. The strategic significance is not to be dismissed, for many political leaders realize the 'power that comes from being able to set the agenda and determine the framework for debate'.¹¹ Thus they can no longer be viewed merely as *instruments* of public diplomacy. To do so is to deny the extent and potential of their diplomatic *agency* — that is, their capacity to effect change within the organizational framework of diplomatic practice¹² — and, in doing so, potentially to alter the larger power dynamics at play. The engagement of political leaders in the diplomatic process is, as Harold Nicolson pre-empted, inevitably political.

Political Leadership and Public Diplomacy: An Indo-Pacific View

The significance of political leaders as public diplomats, whether performing their duties at home or engaging through more formal diplomatic processes, is particularly critical in the Indo-Pacific, a region that is marked by deep transformation and shifting political discourse.¹³ When examining political

10 Richard Feinberg and Stephan Haggard, 'Talking at the Top: Past, Present and Future Summit Diplomacy in Asia', *Global Asia*, vol. 13, no. 4 (December 2018), p. 16, available online at: https://www.globalasia.org/v13no4/cover/talking-at-the-top-past-present-and-future-summit-diplomacy-in-asia_richard-feinbergstephan-haggard.

11 Joseph Nye, 'Donald Trump and the Decline of US Soft Power', *The Strategist* (12 February 2018).

12 For full discussion of diplomatic agency, see Rebecca Adler-Nissen, 'Diplomatic Agency', in Costas M. Constantinou, Pauline Kerr and Paul Sharp (eds), *The SAGE Handbook of Diplomacy* (Los Angeles, CA: SAGE, 2016), pp. 92-103.

13 Moon and Plott, 'A Letter from the Editors'.

leadership in this region, the focus must first turn to China, a nation cast by some as ‘the quintessential Indo-Pacific power’.¹⁴

Leading China’s Rejuvenation

Under the leadership of President Xi Jinping, China is openly seeking to build influence within the Indo-Pacific region. Although initially slow to engage in public diplomacy practice, China has stepped up its investment in the past decade. Estimates suggest annual public diplomacy spending in excess of US\$ 10 billion a year, more than the combined spending of the United States, United Kingdom, France, Germany and Japan.¹⁵ Ingrid D’Hooghe notes that China’s public diplomacy objectives are intricately tied to its rising leadership ambitions:

[... to] help make China’s economic and political rise palatable to the world; contribute to the global recognition of Chinese values and policies; increase the government’s legitimacy; and that it is indispensable in the fight for China’s right to speak and to co-exist with the liberal international world order with its own political model.¹⁶

Since taking office in 2012, President Xi has taken centre stage as producer and director of the nation’s public diplomacy efforts — actively and deliberately engaging public audiences at home and abroad in his ambition to realize the ‘great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation’. Recent developments — including the designation of Xi as the ‘core’ of the Communist Party of China (CCP), the inscription of ‘Xi Jinping Thought’ into the constitution and the removal of term limits for his presidency — signal that Xi will personally shape the values and institutions that will guide China’s leadership within the region for some time to come. In doing so, Xi has bound his leadership authority to the CCP, having ‘diligently gone about reclaiming political dominance for the CCP as the vanguard party and for himself as the party’s representative’.¹⁷ Utilizing methods akin to the one-way propaganda of the Cold War era, Xi himself has come to define the CCP and China in this ‘New Era’.

14 Rory Medcalf, ‘A Term Whose Time Has Come: The Indo-Pacific’, *The Diplomat* (4 December 2012).

15 As reported in Soft Power 30, ‘China’s Soft Power: A Comparative Failure or Secret Success’, *USC Center on Public Diplomacy Blog* (25 August 2017).

16 Ingrid d’Hooghe, ‘China’s Public Diplomacy Shifts Focus: From Building Hardware to Software’, *China Policy Institute Analysis* (24 October 2013).

17 Julie Bowie and David Gitter, ‘Abroad or at Home, China Puts Party First’, *Foreign Policy* (5 December 2018).

The significance of Xi's 'great helmsman' persona at home is not to be discounted. It appears that domestic publics are targets and instruments of the public diplomacy process: to be informed and educated as uncritical supporters and advocates of Xi's policy platform. Xi has embedded himself in the lives of ordinary Chinese through multiple platforms and institutions. David Shambaugh observes that:

Xi kitsch is to be found in shops across the country; television programs celebrate his wise leadership; multimedia tracks his every utterance and activity; and his exhortations bombard the public daily through a ramped up propaganda apparatus.¹⁸

Xi's influence now reaches far into China's digital and social spheres. Rowan Callick suggests that Xi is actively 'transforming the internet in the name of cyber sovereignty into a great tool of control, delivering him broader and deeper power' over the Chinese population.¹⁹ While opportunities for dissent within the People's Republic of China have always been limited, recent moves have ensured that they have now been firmly squashed through Xi's method of 'algorithmic governance'.²⁰ Chinese domestic publics and diaspora have become adept at self-censorship, while propaganda messaging aimed at 'guiding' discussion, alongside increased state infiltration and the monitoring of chat sites, have become common features of China's digital space. Indeed, 'building a renewed sense of national identity that can be widely embraced with pride among a billion Chinese at home',²¹ and many more living throughout the region, is central to Xi's ambitions. Moreover, for many, Xi's vision justifies tightening social controls. As Graham Allison notes, 'few in China would say that political freedoms are more important than reclaiming China's international standing and national pride'.²²

Just as he has done at home, Xi has leveraged his leadership persona on the global stage in a bid to build China's influence and credibility as a global

18 David Shambaugh, 'All Xi, All the Time: Can China's President Live Up to His Own Top Billing', *Global Asia*, vol. 13, no. 3 (September 2018), p. 17.

19 Rowan Callick, Address to the Asia Pacific Council.

20 Mark Chorzempa, Paul Triolo and Samm Sacks, 'China's Social Credit System: A Mark of Progress or a Threat to Privacy', *Peterson Institute for International Economics Policy Brief* (June 2018).

21 Graham Allison, 'What Xi Jinping Wants', *The Atlantic* (31 May 2017), available online at <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/05/what-china-wants/528561/>.

22 Allison, 'What Xi Jinping Wants'.

power that contributes to global public goods. Under Xi's leadership, China has 'upped its game', making significant contributions to the UN's operating budget, global peacekeeping, overseas development assistance, and actively engaging in global policy development from public health, to disaster relief, energy and sea-lane security, counter-terrorism and anti-piracy operations.²³ Xi is prominent on the global stage. He has successfully hosted major leadership summits, including the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in 2014, the Group of Twenty (G20) in 2015, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2018, as well as notable bilateral visits, including with US President Trump, Japan's Prime Minister Abe and India's Prime Minister Modi. Major projects such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) — both launched under Xi — speak further to his ambition to increase China's global influence and ultimately set the terms of the emerging regional agenda. Xi asserts that China 'will keep contributing Chinese wisdom and strength to global governance'.²⁴ While many may welcome China's contribution, when cast against China's rising military and economic influence in the region, Xi's words strike an ominous tone.

While projecting China's influence overtly on the global stage, Xi has also ramped up the controversial global influence activities of the United Front Work Department. Working through extensive diaspora, student, business and media networks abroad, the United Front aims to 'win support for China's political agenda, [and] accumulate influence overseas'.²⁵ However, media reports revealing the extent and frequently subversive nature of these activities have done little to improve China's positioning in the region. Instead, they signal a shift in China's public diplomacy under Xi, whereby China must not only reassure, but also 'dictate how it's perceived and that the world is biased against China'.²⁶ They also raise wider concerns across the region that Xi's pursuit of soft power in the region has a dangerously sharp edge.²⁷

23 Shambaugh, 'All Xi, All the Time', p. 19.

24 Xi, 'Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in all Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era'.

25 James Kynge, Lucy Hornby and Jamil Anderlini, 'Inside China's Secret "Magic Weapon" for Worldwide Influence', *Financial Times* (26 October 2017).

26 Kynge *et al.*, 'Inside China's Secret "Magic Weapon" for Worldwide Influence'.

27 Joseph Nye, 'China's Soft and Sharp Power', *The Strategist* (8 January 2018); and Anne-Marie Brady, 'NZ vs China: We Could be the Next Albania', *NZ Herald* (21 February 2018). See also Anne-Marie Brady, 'Magic Weapons: China's Political Influence Activities under Xi Jinping', Wilson Centre Paper, (18 September 2017); and Nick McKenzie, 'Power and Influence: The Hard Edge of China's Soft Power', *ABC Four Corners* (5 June 2017).

Counterbalancing Narratives: 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific'

China's increasing global prominence has prompted other regional powers to consider how they might effectively counterbalance the influence of the rising great power in the region. Thus, the narrative of a 'free and open Indo-Pacific' — an idea initially spearheaded by Japan's Prime Minister Abe and now sustained by key regional democracies, India and Australia, with the support of the United States — has begun to gain traction.

Shinzo Abe, now one of the region's most experienced leaders, laid the foundations for the 'Indo-Pacific' during his first term in office. In his 2007 speech to the Indian Parliament, Abe's reference to the 'dynamic coupling of the Indian and Pacific Oceans'²⁸ caught the attention of strategic publics — academics, political commentators and journalists — in India, Japan, the United States and Australia. Abe later used news opinion pieces to promote the idea of the four nations working in coalition as 'Asia's democratic security diamond' to preserve and promote key values, including freedom of navigation, democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights.²⁹ It was a proposal that was reinforced by plans for a Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (also known as 'the Quad'), involving the four nations. Even though the Quad failed to take shape at that time, Abe continued to engage deliberately and publicly with key leaders to advance the narrative. Those early efforts gave rise to a complex web of interwoven bilateral and trilateral links, which sustained a loose coalition of the four nations, enabling reconstitution of 'the Quad' (at least at the official level) one decade later.

India's Prime Minister Modi alongside the Australian prime minister of the day,³⁰ although both cautious of their respective complex relationships with China, have followed Abe's lead. For all three nations — Japan, India and Australia — the Indo-Pacific narrative reflects a new geopolitical convergence: it usefully maintains pressure for US engagement in the region at a time when US President Trump appears intent on withdrawal from other domains, while establishing a platform for values-based discourse that seeks to dilute China's influence, while encouraging China to observe the established rules-based order. The three leaders have advanced the narrative through complementary

28 Shinzo Abe, 'Confluence of Two Seas', address delivered to the Parliament of the Republic of India, New Delhi (22 August 2007), available online at: <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmvo708/speech-2.html>.

29 Shinzo Abe, 'Asia's Democratic Security Diamond', *Project Syndicate* (27 December 2012).

30 Australian political leadership is hampered by ongoing leadership spills, which bring their own public diplomacy challenges for the nation. The most recent saw Malcolm Turnbull replaced by Scott Morrison as prime minister and leader of Australia's Liberal National Coalition government in August 2018.

public diplomacy activities, carefully targeted to draw strategic audiences into the Indo-Pacific narrative, but calibrated to avoid suggestions that they might be strategizing the containment of China.

Bilateral and multilateral summitry involving political leaders (including foreign and defence ministers) promote their regular dialogue. Bilateral leaders' meetings are now held on an annual basis for the three powers (Japan–India and Australia–Japan), with significant media coverage, while leaders of all three nations tend to gather at annual regional and global leaders' summits, including through the East Asia Summit (EAS), APEC and even the G20. Other public diplomacy initiatives, including delivering key speeches, policy statements and opinion pieces to influential audiences, aim to sustain and amplify the narrative. For example, during his term as Australia's prime minister, Malcolm Turnbull delivered the keynote to Singapore's 2017 Shangri-La Dialogue. India's Prime Minister Modi delivered the keynote speech the following year in 2018. Both anchored their remarks in the notion of a 'free and open Indo-Pacific'. In a bold move — presumably sanctioned by their respective political leaders — the naval chiefs of Japan, India, Australia and the United States shared the stage during the closing plenary session of Delhi's 2018 Raisina Dialogue to promote the need for wider maritime cooperation in the face of increased Chinese aggression at sea. These targeted initiatives have been supported through policy statements. Japan embedded the 'free and open Indo-Pacific' strategy within its foreign policy in 2016. Australia's 2017 *Foreign Policy White Paper* refers to the Indo-Pacific as a neighbourhood, 'in which adherence to rules delivers lasting peace, where the rights of all states are respected, and where open markets facilitate the free flow of trade, capital and ideas'. India's Prime Minister Modi has also confirmed the Indo-Pacific as the regional framework for India's foreign and defence policies.³¹

US President Donald Trump played an essential role in further raising the profile of the Indo-Pacific narrative. His repeated reference to US aspirations for a 'free and open Indo-Pacific' during an extended tour to the region in 2017 captured media headlines throughout South-East Asia. Trump's Indo-Pacific rhetoric was reinforced through the US National Security Strategy and subsequent renaming of the US Indo-Pacific Command (from the US Pacific Command). These developments were reported as significant, because they represent 'a specific vision for a rules-based order in one of the world's most dynamic regions' — an order that is seen to be 'increasingly under duress

31 Rahul Roy Chaudhury, 'Modi's Vision for the Indo-Pacific Region', *IISS Analysis* (2 June 2018).

from an assertive and ambitious China'.³² Importantly, however, these shifts in US positioning reflect positively on the sustained and consistent messaging by Japanese, Indian and Australian leadership over the previous decade. In his keynote speech to the Shangri-La Dialogue, Australia's Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull hinted at the significance of such leadership coalitions, noting that:

Now in this brave new world, we cannot rely on great powers to safeguard our interests. We have to take responsibility for our own security and prosperity while recognizing we are stronger when sharing the burden of collective leadership with trusted partners and friends. The gathering clouds of uncertainty and instability are signals for all of us to play more active roles in protecting and shaping the future of this region.³³

In contrast to Chinese President Xi's sweeping efforts to set and control the narrative of China's rejuvenation at home and abroad, Prime Ministers Abe, Modi and now Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison have sustained a targeted messaging campaign aimed firmly towards strategic publics and opinion leaders. The 'Indo-Pacific' narrative hasn't won mainstream popularity. Nor is it intended to. Rather, for these leaders the intent is to see the language and underpinning principles of the 'free and open Indo-Pacific' embedded in the policies of nations and institutions across the region in order to counter, or at least to manage, China's rising influence. Ensuring US policy uptake of the Indo-Pacific was a significant win, one that might be credited in particular to Shinzo Abe. However, integrating the Indo-Pacific narrative into the policy of regional institutions, especially ASEAN, presents a more significant challenge for the traditional and public diplomacy skills of regional leaders.

The ASEAN Way

South-East Asian leaders are thus caught in the middle of the emerging Indo-Pacific contest. Yet the leadership style for these leaders is marked by an aversion to prominence beyond their national boundaries. For many, addressing the multiplicity of internal policy issues while managing fractured domestic constituencies fosters an inward gaze. Indonesia's President Joko Widodo is such an example. Elected in 2014 on the promise of a 'bottom-up,

32 Jeff M. Smith, 'Unpacking the Free and Open Indo-Pacific', Commentary, *War on the Rocks* (14 March 2018).

33 Malcolm Turnbull, Keynote Address, 16th IISS Asia Security Summit, Shangri-La Dialogue, Singapore (3 June 2017).

people-centred approach' to policy-making and governing, President Widodo (affectionately known as 'Jokowi') has been consumed by the need to engage with and appeal to domestic audiences. Ellen Huijgh suggests that Jokowi's engagement with external audiences occurs as a result of so-called 'intermes-tic' policy considerations, rather than a deliberate outward focus.³⁴

It is a theme that resonates elsewhere. Malaysia's recently appointed Prime Minister Mahathir Bin Mohamad, no stranger to the regional or global stage, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, whose popular appeal within the Philippines remains surprising to the outside world, and Cambodia's increasingly authoritarian Prime Minister Hun Sen all present similarly inward-looking approaches. Indeed, leaders from the South-East Asian region appear ambivalent about engaging with publics on the regional or global stage. Nonetheless, each of these leaders plays an instrumental public diplomacy role, contributing to the optics and reputation of their nation, including through the conduct of their leadership at home.

More important for South-East Asian leaders is the role of collective leadership that is demonstrated through their commitment to ASEAN, as a regional institution and platform for strategic diplomacy. Despite their different political persuasions and approaches, South-East Asian leaders are consistent in their calls for ASEAN centrality, to the point that it tends to dampen any overt public diplomacy aspirations that they might harbour as individuals. As a multilateral organization supported by a formal secretariat, ASEAN engages in public diplomacy activities across various layers of the institution to help 'bring understanding about its policies and activities to [the] regional and international community' and to 'get its people involved in regional issues and the community-building process'.³⁵ On both counts ASEAN achieves uneven levels of success.

For South-East Asian political leaders, the opportunity to engage visibly as regional leaders hinges on ASEAN summitry, which includes ASEAN leaders' meetings alongside a range of other related forums, including the East Asian Summit — a leadership summit that is strikingly Indo-Pacific in reach and composition.³⁶ The geography, history and anatomy of ASEAN have seen a particular style of leadership emerge through the summits. The so-called 'ASEAN Way', marked by 'mutual consultation' and 'consensus-building',

34 See Ellen Huijgh, 'Indonesia's Intermestic Public Diplomacy: Features and Future', *Politics & Policy*, vol. 45, no. 5 (2017), p. 763.

35 Zhikica Zach Pagovski, 'Public Diplomacy of Multilateral Organizations: The Cases of NATO, the EU and ASEAN', *CPD Perspectives* (June 2015), p. 17.

36 Today the East Asia Summit draws together member nations of ASEAN, plus China, Japan, the Republic of Korea, India, Russia, the United States, Australia and New Zealand.

reflects ASEAN's 'preferred methods for managing disputes and moderating differences', accompanied by a distinct ASEAN discomfort with 'adversarial approaches'.³⁷ From a public diplomacy perspective, this model promotes a welcome façade of political unity across the Indo-Pacific region. Resulting communiqués give little away; 'couched in opaque diplomatic language', they tend to 'gloss over complex issues and choose not to make public that which governments consider to be too sensitive'.³⁸

While ASEAN has proven itself to be a robust platform for dialogue for more than 50 years, it is nonetheless an elite model of regional governance, which reflects inherent vulnerabilities in the current climate of geopolitical contest. Concerns that China is seeking to leverage economic influence to split ASEAN unity are increasingly well founded.³⁹ At the same time, Japan, India and Australia have all increased public diplomacy efforts towards the grouping, including through high-profile annual summitry,⁴⁰ youth leadership, education and sporting initiatives⁴¹ and joint statements emphasizing shared interests in a 'rules-based Indo-Pacific that [...] embraces key principles such as ASEAN's unity and Centrality, inclusiveness, transparency and complements ASEAN's community building'.⁴² The core message being delivered suggests that 'ASEAN sits at the heart' of the Indo-Pacific.⁴³

Although captivated by the Indo-Pacific discourse, South-East Asian nations have taken some time to warm to it. For some, the narrative raises uneasiness about their own positioning within the region and appears dismissive of the enduring notion of ASEAN centrality. China's concerns about the Indo-Pacific as a form of strategic design have found resonance in South-East Asia. As Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong acknowledged, ASEAN would accept the Indo-Pacific construct provided that the end result is 'an open and inclusive regional architecture, where ASEAN member states are not forced to

37 Sultan Nazrin Muizzudin Shah, 'ASEAN and Asia-Pacific Peace and Prosperity', address delivered to ASEAN-Australia Dialogue, Sydney (18 March 2018).

38 Shah, 'ASEAN and Asia-Pacific Peace and Prosperity'.

39 Huong Le Thu, 'China's Dual Strategy of Coercion and Inducement towards ASEAN', *The Pacific Review* (15 January 2018).

40 Swaran Singh, 'India and ASEAN Look to Each Other to Balance China's Rise', *South China Morning Post* (18 January 2018); Richard Heyderian, 'Is Australia Set to Join ASEAN as China's Assertiveness Grows?', *South China Morning Post* (26 March 2018).

41 Joint Declaration of the ASEAN-Australia Special Summit: The Sydney Declaration, Sydney (14 March 2018).

42 Chairman's Statement at the 21st ASEAN-Japan Summit, Singapore (14 November 2018). It is worth noting that centrality is spelt with a capital 'C' in the official declaration.

43 Julie Bishop, Address to the Asia Society, New York (8 March 2018).

take sides'.⁴⁴ While most nations across the region have a 'shared interest in preventing China's domination, [...] they all have complex interdependent relationships with China, which they need to maintain in a reasonable state of equilibrium'.⁴⁵ An Indo-Pacific narrative that either excludes or seeks to contain China is a difficult pill for ASEAN leadership to swallow. Finding a way to bring China into the Indo-Pacific discourse would be helpful to ASEAN.

Indonesia's former Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa, an advocate for ASEAN leadership, argues that the quiet diplomacy and public ambiguity of ASEAN leaders no longer offer a sufficient model, particularly in the face of the twenty-first-century geopolitical contest. In his view, 'ASEAN cannot afford to be a passive bystander to these geopolitical shifts', but 'must demonstrate leadership — thought leadership' that will contribute to the shape of the evolving order.⁴⁶ ASEAN's reluctance to play a more prominent leadership role, including through public diplomacy, in the key debates of the region points to the potential for strategic drift and irrelevance in the twenty-first-century strategic re-ordering. While Thailand takes on the mantle of ASEAN chairmanship in 2019, it is unlikely that the current trajectory will change.

Conclusion

The geopolitical realities of shifting power and contest in the Indo-Pacific region highlight the strategic public diplomacy role for political leaders — engaging publics, both at home and abroad — in coming decades. The objective — to shape a regional order that is favourable to national interests — provides a consistent, underlying motivation. Yet, as highlighted through this paper, asymmetries and variations arise in the approaches taken by political leaders towards public audiences. Although unsurprising, these distinctions are significant when viewed against the backdrop of regional fault lines emerging between autocratic and democratic systems of governance.

When cast against the backdrop of strategic re-ordering, it becomes clear that President Xi's intent is to advance China's 'New Era' of rejuvenation, while framing the political agendas, institutions and practices that will ultimately shape the future Indo-Pacific region. Xi's firm hold on the levers of power,

44 Seow Bei Yi, 'Principles of Japan's Indo-Pacific Strategy Align with Singapore, ASEAN Priorities', *The Straits Times* (14 November 2018).

45 John McCarthy, 'Correspondence', *Australian Foreign Affairs*, no. 4 (October 2018), p. 121.

46 Marty Natalegawa, 'Leadership and Regionalism in Southeast Asia', 2018 Asia Lecture, Griffith Asia Institute, given in Brisbane (28 November 2018).

alongside broad strategies to build China's profile and the endorsement of subversive offshore influence tactics, may prove effective. Political actors and publics across the region are attracted to China's offering, particularly when it comes with the promise of economic gain. China's sheer size and weight as 'the biggest power in the history of the world'⁴⁷ means that any form of pushback brings risks.

Nonetheless, Xi's ambitious pursuit of absolute control at home and of unprecedented influence on the global stage provides the touchstone against which other political leaders across the Indo-Pacific region are calibrating their own public diplomacy roles. The middle and emerging regional powers of Japan, Australia and India are working separately and together to engage strategic publics in values-based discourse about the Indo-Pacific. Spearheaded by the enduring efforts of Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, the intent is to leverage strategic public opinion in ways that will maintain US engagement in the region and dilute China's influence, while enticing China's compliance with the international rules-based order. The Indo-Pacific narrative and its underpinning principles provide a strategic opportunity for middle and small powers, including those of South-East Asia, to shape the shifting order in ways that remain conducive to their interests. Maintaining consistent and coherent messaging will be a significant challenge, especially as two of the three leaders — Modi and Morrison — face elections during 2019.

By contrast, South-East Asian leaders continue to shy away from overt and outward-looking public diplomacy leadership, preferring to orient their gaze around 'intermestic' concerns. Together, South-East Asian leaders have established a successful pattern of collective, consensus-based leadership via ASEAN. For decades, the institution has provided a robust platform for strategic diplomacy, reinforced by regular leaders' summits. Yet the ASEAN model is under pressure, faced with the increasingly dominant and disruptive rise of China. ASEAN members, and the political leaders that represent them, appear to have limited capacity for thought leadership in the face of the current contest and may thus end up caught in strategic drift and subject to the influence of others.

As public diplomacy takes a more strategic turn, practitioners and scholars must be attuned to the public diplomacy role of political leaders in shaping critical narratives — through their words and deeds — delivered at home and abroad. The challenge is not only to keep pace with, but to anticipate the future political debates, and to engage leaders in consistent, creative and, where appropriate, collective messaging that resonates with influencers,

47 Lee Kwan Yew, quoted in Allison, 'What Xi Jinping Wants'.

opinion-leaders and ordinary publics alike. Complacency is no longer a viable option. In the contested and multipolar Indo-Pacific, public diplomacy, particularly when exercised by political leaders, is undeniably strategic — establishing the narrative, setting the agenda and promoting the rules that will underpin the emerging regional order. From a national interest perspective, the stakes could not be higher.

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