A message of freedom and openness is certainly much-needed, given the degree to which authoritarianism and illiberalism are on the rise across the Indo-Pacific. Recent polls by the Pew Research Center showed notably weak levels of commitment to representative democracy across Asia, even in some established democracies and Transparency International points to challenges including "rampant" public corruption, widespread attacks on "freedom of expression", and severe constraints on "civic space". The most recent annual update from Reporters without Borders paints a similarly worrisome picture of press freedom, reporting that the Asia-Pacific is home to the "deadliest countries" and "biggest prisons" for journalists and bloggers. The key question for the Trump administration will be whether it moves beyond hard-hitting rhetoric to focus on the policies and programs needed to reverse these trends.

The administration's public narrative has been strong, but it has missed critical opportunities to support its message in practice. On the international level, the administration has shown little interest in strengthening regional institutions and agreements. President Trump has twice skipped out on attending the East Asia Summit, missing a unique opportunity to engage other leaders in a discussion about the principles and values the United States seeks to advance in the region. Likewise, although the administration has been outspoken about China's repression of civil liberties, it has done little to address wide-scale human rights abuse in places such as Myanmar, the Philippines, and North Korea.

Beyond its regional policies, one of the most notable weak spots in the Trump administration's diplomatic approach has been the degree to which it has crippled itself on the budgetary and personnel front. Although the National Security Strategy posits the administration will "upgrade our diplomatic capabilities to compete in the current environment", the administration proposed draconian cuts to State Department and USAID funding that would have slashed support for good governance, democracy promotion, and human rights. Similarly, the U.S. Foreign Service has seen a remarkable degree of attrition under the current administration, and several critical diplomatic posts—including the chief diplomat for Asia at the State Department and the U.S. Ambassador to Australia—remain vacant (a new nominee for Ambassador to Australia was announced on 5 November 2018). In the switch from Secretary Tillerson to Secretary Pompeo, the administration now has a chief diplomat who appears to have the President's trust. But with the degree to which the Secretary has been focused on North Korea and Iran, it's not at all clear how much diplomatic bandwidth will be left for the rest of the region. Unless the administration rectifies some of these challenges and gets serious about resourcing its diplomatic strategy, it will be competing for U.S. ideals with one hand tied behind its back.

Is the United States building collective security?

Aside from the dramatic escalation of tensions on the Korean peninsula in 2017, U.S. defence policy has been one of the most consistent elements of the Trump administration's Indo-Pacific strategy. The administration is continuing to implement some of the major security moves the Obama administration made in the region—including implementing force posture agreements with the Philippines and Australia, and moving more advanced capabilities forward to the Indo-Pacific. Under Secretary Mattis, the Defense Department has also prioritised bolstering its ties to close allies and partners and appears to be doubling down on a few key relationships—India and Vietnam—in particular. The strength of U.S. security ties has provided much-needed ballast at a time when bilateral political and economic relationships have been in flux. To some degree this reflects relative bipartisan agreement about U.S. security relationships, but it also reflects the influence of Secretary of Defense Mattis, who has served as a steadying voice within the administration.

Going forward, there are signs that the United States may be moving into a rockier, less even-keel period on the security front. The relative stability the U.S.-China military-to-military relationship maintained in the early days of the Trump administration is now fraying. The past few months have seen a notable downturn in the relationship, with China responding to a range of U.S. actions—such as disinviting the People's Liberation Army (PLA) from the international Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) naval exercises and placing sanctions on a branch of the Chinese military—by refusing a U.S. Navy port call to Hong Kong and postponing a counterpart visit with Secretary Mattis. More important, however, the U.S. national security community's deep (and bipartisan) concern about an eroding U.S. military edge in the Pacific is not going away. Addressing this problem will undoubtedly lead to further decisions, such as the recent U.S. withdrawal from the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF), that will impact strategic stability in the region.

Many U.S. (and allied) national security experts will rally behind such an approach. But for anxious regional partners fearful of an overly-heated U.S.-China relationship,