

Broken Pivot: Examining Changes to the U.S. Diplomatic Footprint in the Indo-Pacific

By Evan Cooper

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Broken Pivot: Analyzing Changes to the U.S. Diplomatic Footprint in Asia

The United States has not invested in nor deployed the diplomatic resources necessary to advance its interests in the Indo-Pacific region.

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Since President Barack Obama’s announcement of the “Pivot to Asia” in 2011, there has been bipartisan recognition of the importance of the United States building ties in the region. But underinvestment in the State Department and competing budgetary priorities have left the Department unable to increase the number of positions in many Indo-Pacific nations, impeding diplomacy. This report provides ideas for how the United States could develop a larger and sustainable diplomatic footprint in the Indo-Pacific, allowing the United States to better pursue its interests.

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Executive Summary

This report examines how the U.S. diplomatic footprint has changed in the Indo-Pacific region from 2011 — when the pivot to Asia was first announced — to 2024. The last three administrations have repeatedly pledged to focus on the Indo-Pacific, increasingly highlighting competition with China as requiring deeper partnerships with countries in the region. The paper utilizes annual budget requests from the State Department to examine the extent to which the Department has tried to grow its diplomatic presence in the region through new postings at embassies and consulates. A comparison of the funding requests for the regional bureaus and positions dedicated to the Indo-Pacific countries with those for Europe and the Middle East reveals that these crucial elements of the diplomatic footprint have not significantly expanded and remain undersized compared with the U.S. presence in other regions. A closer look at how the U.S. diplomatic approach to India, Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, and the Marshall Islands has changed from 2011-2024 largely confirms that the diplomatic pivot was incomplete, at best. The paper also analyzes U.S. diplomacy towards China, comparing it with the five countries that the United States has sought to draw more closely into its orbit.

This analysis reveals that U.S. diplomatic outreach towards the Indo-Pacific has been halting and inconsistent. The overarching impediment is a failure by U.S. leaders to implement a strategy of engagement that utilizes the diplomatic tool. The Biden administration's Indo-Pacific Strategy is a positive step towards steady expansion of U.S. diplomacy in the region, but there has not been a commensurate effort by the U.S. Congress to grow the country's diplomatic footprint. And though summits and high-level meetings between U.S. leaders and their counterparts in the region have yielded concrete agreements, the failure to expand the cadre of U.S. diplomats on the ground conducting daily diplomacy impedes the establishment of sustainable economic and security relationships in the Indo-Pacific region.

Fundamentally, a successful pivot to Asia requires consistent prioritization of the Indo-Pacific and comprehensive utilization of the diplomatic tool. This does not necessarily mean a massive expansion of the international affairs budget, although the State Department is in need of greater funding that, at the absolute minimum, keeps pace with inflation. Rather, there needs to be a calculated deployment of the Department's resources to achieve the greatest impact in the part of the world that currently holds the most strategic value. Congress should work with the State Department to support the reallocation of existing assets and provide adequate funding for the facilities, activities, and programs overseen by Foreign and Civil Service officers, while targeting areas and issues that can be deprioritized without undermining U.S. strategy. Concurrently, the State Department should continue its effort to become more agile, enabling it to address the most pressing diplomatic priorities at a given time. This includes creating a diplomatic reserve corps, placing a higher emphasis on education and training, and adopting a diplomatic posture review. But for any reforms to yield long-term diplomatic gains, subsequent administrations need to clearly identify their strategic priorities and embrace diplomacy as a primary way to pursue their identified ends.

Introduction

President Barack Obama’s speech to the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum in late 2011 marked the beginning of a new initiative in U.S. foreign policy: the “Pivot to Asia.”¹ Under this policy, the United States would dedicate more resources to this strategically critical part of the world, expanding its regional trade and enhancing the United States’ military presence there. The region holds 60% of the world’s population, seven of the world’s ten largest militaries, five nuclear powers, and five countries allied with the United States.² The region hosts two of the three largest economies in the world, the most populous nation, and the largest democracy.³ It has the most economically important sea lanes and nine of the ten largest ports.⁴ It also is home to China, which has come to be seen by Washington as its primary rival.

Although there was little continuity across the foreign policies of the Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations, the intensified focus on Asia — especially the region deemed the “Indo-Pacific”— has been, at least rhetorically, sustained by all three.⁵ The Biden administration’s Indo-Pacific Strategy summarized the bipartisan view of the importance of the region:

*The passage of time has underscored the strategic necessity of the United States’ consistent role. At the end of the Cold War, the United States considered but rejected the idea of withdrawing our military presence, understanding that the region held strategic value that would only grow in the 21st century. Since then, administrations of both political parties have shared a commitment to the region. The George W. Bush Administration understood Asia’s growing importance and engaged closely with the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Japan, and India. The Obama Administration significantly accelerated American prioritization of Asia, investing new diplomatic, economic, and military resources there. And the Trump Administration also recognized the Indo-Pacific as the world’s center of gravity.*⁶

Although the Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations have each pursued different approaches to the region, all three have recognized diplomacy as central to their strategies. In a 2011 article in *Foreign Policy*, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton emphasized that the Pivot to Asia first and foremost required “sustained commitment” to what she called “forward-deployed diplomacy.”⁷ In her words, this meant “continuing to dispatch the full range of our diplomatic assets — including our highest-ranking officials, our development experts, our interagency teams, and our permanent assets — to every country and corner of the Asia-Pacific region.” The Trump administration’s *Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific* stated that the interest of the United States was to preserve diplomatic access to the region and sought to emphasize its commitment through “robust public diplomacy.”⁸ This included deepening established partnerships with countries like

Thailand and the Philippines, improved relationships with strategically important Indo-Pacific nations, and diplomacy with China that emphasized “high-level, substantive interaction.”⁹

The Biden administration has taken components of both the Obama and Trump administrations’ Indo-Pacific approaches and attempted to expand them. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in 2021, “The Indo-Pacific region will shape the trajectory of the world in the 21st century,” and outlined five pillars for U.S. policy towards the region that included components of policies of the prior two administrations, particularly the emphasis on a free and open Indo-Pacific.¹⁰ Biden’s 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy extended beyond those five pillars and has become a critical component of his foreign policy agenda, and the regional strategy was named as a priority in Biden’s 2024 international affairs budget.¹¹

This report examines how components of the U.S. diplomatic footprint in the Indo-Pacific have changed since the announcement of the Pivot to Asia in 2011. The analysis proceeds along two different tracks. First, the researchers analyzed the State Department’s diplomatic engagement budget requests for 2011-24. The researchers examined budget requests instead of appropriated budgets both because the requests demonstrate the intended strategy of a given administration and because they are available for each year (Congress has failed to pass State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs budgets for some of the years in question). These requests also incorporate the prior year’s budgetary realities and are crafted in a manner that is intended to make the requests seem as realistic as possible. In analyzing the requests, the researchers compared how the staffing of State Department personnel has changed in Asia, particularly in domestic State Department and overseas mission positions under the East Asian and Pacific Affairs and South and Central Asia bureaus, and compared those changes with the levels of staffing changes in the European and Near Eastern Affairs bureaus. It is important to note that moving and augmenting staff, particularly overseas, is not just a financial question, but necessarily involves additional facilities, housing, and other support systems so there can be a significant lag between securing funding and the actual deployment of new diplomats. This comparison seeks to elucidate whether the State Department has successfully moved staff into the two bureaus covering Asia and their embassies and consulates.

This paper argues that if a pivot to Asia is to be successful, staffing and funding need to be directed toward these regional bureaus. Even if the Pivot to Asia and the Indo-Pacific Strategy are ultimately economic or security-focused, rather than focused on political matters, diplomatic staff are imperative for a pivot strategy to be successful. People and resources ensure the prioritization and sustainability of a strategy, establishing connections and facilitating regular dialogue with Washington about the political, economic, and security partnership possibilities with a given country. This method of analysis does not fully capture how administrations might move staff within the region. It also does not fully cover the resources and activities of other executive branch agencies since in each embassy there might be officials from the Departments of Commerce, Agriculture, Defense, and Justice, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the Central Intelligence Agency, or other elements of the U.S. government. Nonetheless, given the importance of U.S. diplomats in executing foreign policy, this analysis provides significant insights into how the U.S. diplomatic footprint in Asia has changed since 2011.

The second form of analysis this report employs is an examination of case studies of five key Indo-Pacific countries: India, Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, and the Marshall Islands during the period since the pivot to Asia was announced. These countries were selected because of their continuing importance in the regional strategies of all three administrations. Put another way, if significant changes were going to take place in the diplomatic footprint in the Indo-Pacific, the results should be evident in these countries.

This report uses the case-study format because a regional strategy does not mean all countries in the region should, or can, be handled the same. For example, moving additional diplomatic staff into one country may be more feasible and more impactful than doing so in a neighboring country. For each of the five countries, this report examines aspects that contribute to the U.S. diplomatic footprint: foreign assistance, trips by high-ranking U.S. officials, U.S. ambassadorial appointments, and students from those countries studying in U.S. universities.

The report includes a sixth case study, which examines how the U.S. diplomatic footprint has changed in China. The analysis of shifts in China is intended to serve as a contrasting example of what U.S. diplomacy toward a competitor looks like, compared with the five partner states that the United States seeks to draw more closely into its orbit.

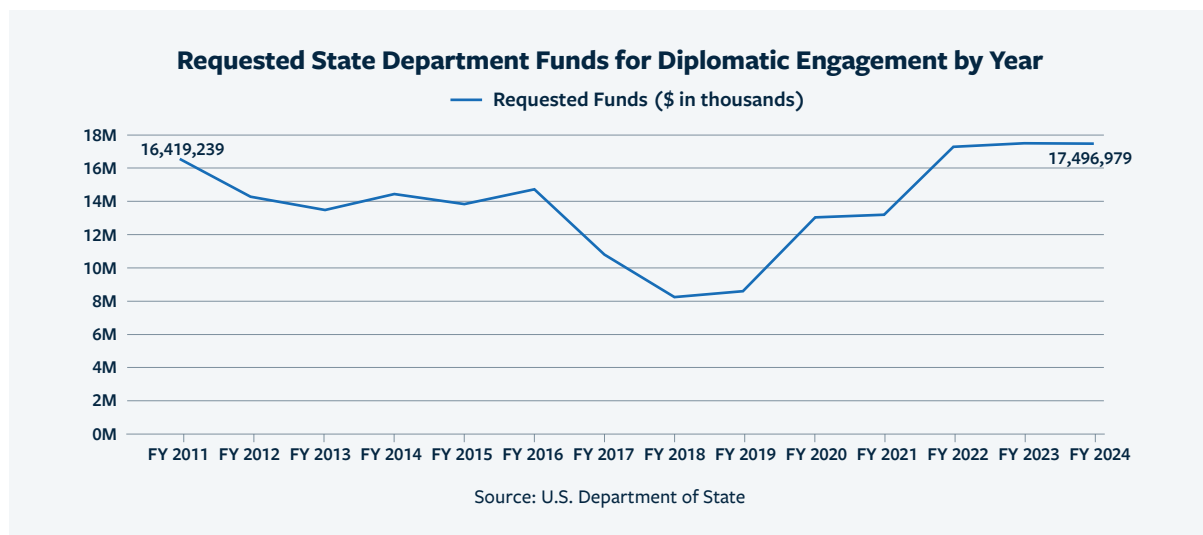
Overall, this analysis shows that the United States has begun to increase its diplomatic footprint in the Indo-Pacific region, but this posture does not yet constitute a significant pivot. The Biden administration's Indo-Pacific Strategy is the most concerted effort to increase U.S. diplomatic presence in the region. The opening of new embassies in the Indo-Pacific and consulates in India, high-level convenings in Washington with regional leaders, and reorganization within the State Department that has focused on addressing the challenges posed by China are positive efforts to increase U.S. diplomatic capacity in the most strategically important region in the world. But the U.S. Congress has failed to provide the consistent budgetary resources and oversight necessary for targeted and sustained growth of diplomatic personnel in the Indo-Pacific, while subsequent administrations have overly focused on military-to-military ties without capitalizing on opportunities to deepen economic and cultural exchanges.

The final section of this report provides recommendations for how the United States might shift its diplomatic footprint to Asia in a sustainable manner and more broadly develop the means to make strategic diplomatic pivots. The importance of Asia has only grown since 2011, with the region holding immense potential for U.S. economic partnership, as well as being the region where competition with China is most pertinent. A sustainable U.S. approach to the region — one that can facilitate reliable security and economic cooperation — requires forward-leaning diplomacy. As the political scientist Paul Staniland wrote in *Foreign Affairs*, “An effective U.S. strategy in Asia requires understanding crucial differences among countries, taking them seriously, and carefully adapting policy initiatives to very specific local contexts.”¹² Each of those components of an effective strategy relies on diplomats first and foremost. Nevertheless, as this research demonstrates, the United States has not invested in nor deployed the diplomatic resources necessary to advance its interests in the region.

Examining the State Department's Footprint in Asia

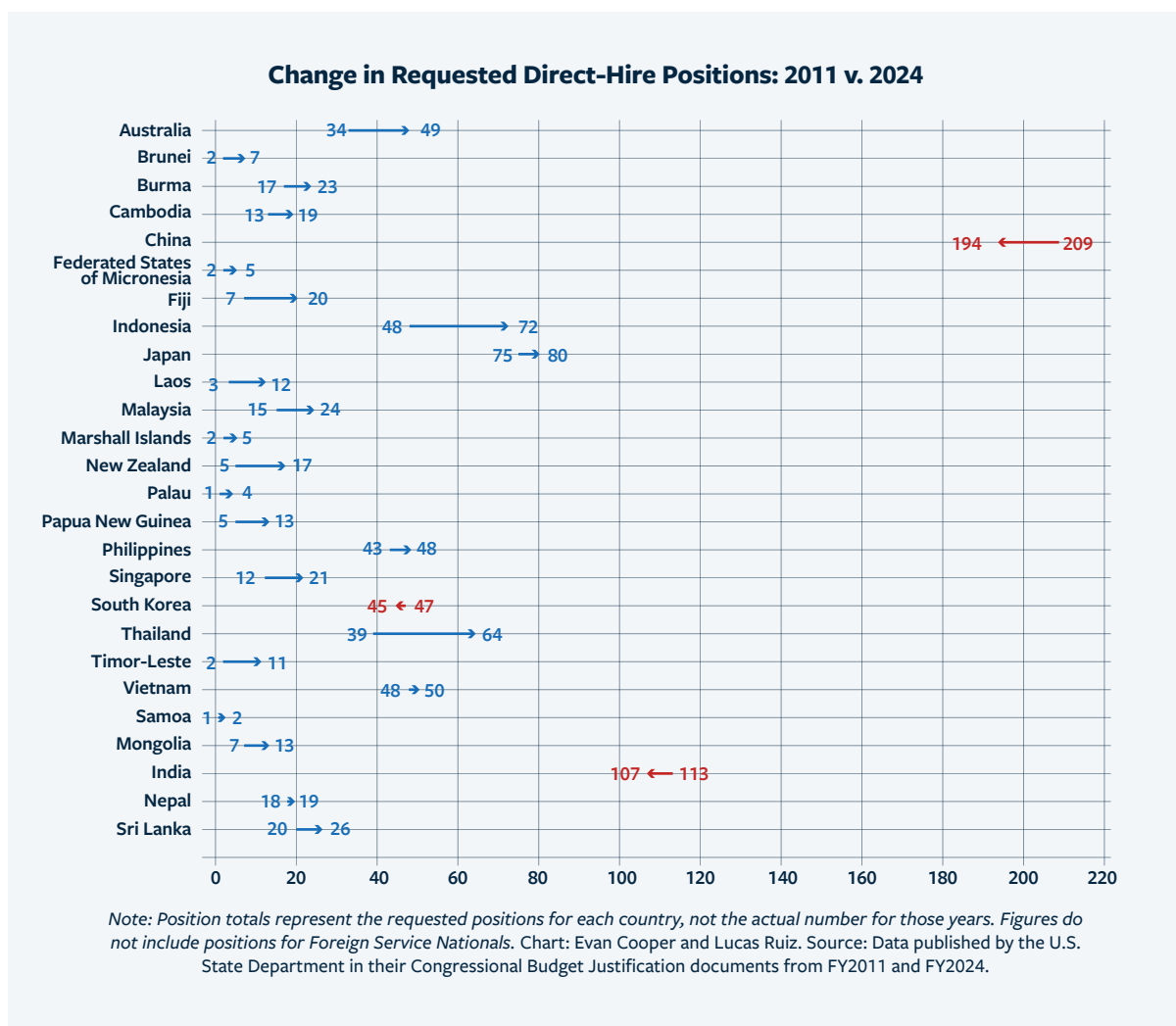
The State Department calls its personnel its “most valuable asset,” and for good reason.¹³ The majority of the Department’s budget is spent on personnel because diplomacy can only be conducted through the efforts of staff members. Given the importance of diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific region, and the centrality of State Department personnel to the conduct of U.S. diplomacy, this research analyzes how staffing in the region has changed since the Pivot to Asia was announced in 2011. This entailed focusing on the two regional bureaus that encompass Asia: East Asian and Pacific Affairs (EAP) and South and Central Asian Affairs (SCA). Notably, these bureaus are not the only ones that work on the Indo-Pacific region within the State Department. The functional bureaus, which cover a wide variety of issues such as human rights, countering terrorism, and economics and business affairs, also administer programs in the region, which is highlighted in the Biden administration’s Indo-Pacific Strategy. However, nearly the entirety of the State Department’s personnel footprint in Asia, who work in the embassies and consulates spread across the 34 countries, as well as those working on the region at State Department Headquarters back in Washington, are represented in the budgetary figures for EAP and SCA.

The topline changes to staffing requests from the Department of State in 2011-2024 appear generally positive. The total number of direct-hire civil and foreign service positions in the Department’s budget request over the 14-year period increased by 10,335, which constitutes a 55% increase from FY 2011.¹⁴ However, while the requested funding for diplomatic engagement from the Department has also increased over the 2011-2024 timeframe, it is by a comparatively meager \$1.07 billion, or 6.5%. Adjusted for inflation, the FY 2024 request of \$17.5 billion is \$5.3 billion less than the FY 2011 request.¹⁵



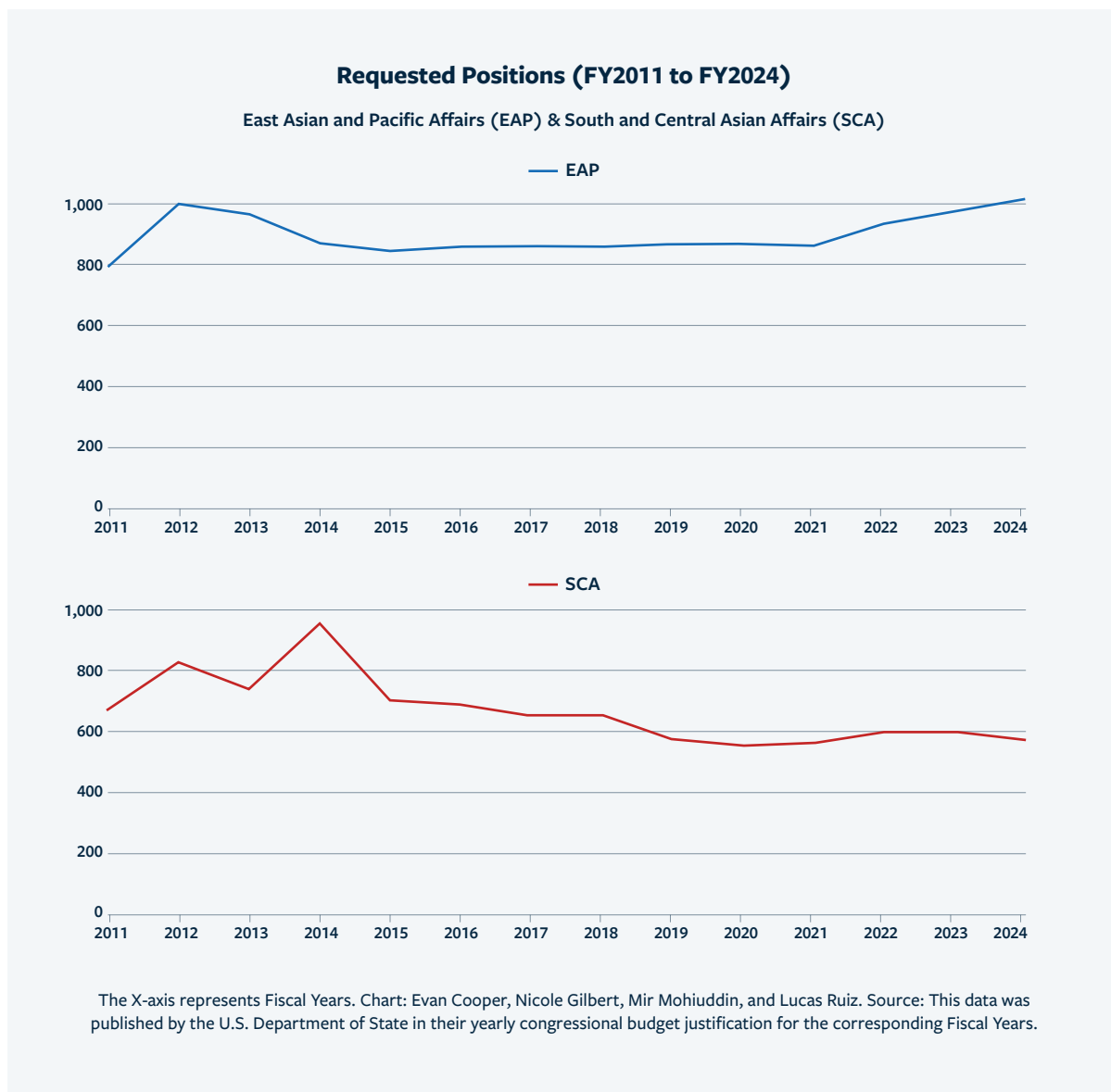
Drilling down into where the increased positions and funding have gone reveals that the overall expansion of State Department personnel has not focused on the EAP and SCA bureaus. The 2024 request shows 211 new direct-hire positions for EAP as compared with the 800 total positions requested in 2011, and a 9.5% increase of just \$32.6 million in the bureau's funding request, well below inflation over that period. As a share of all requested positions in the State Department, the FY 2024 request for EAP constituted about 3.5% (1011 positions out of 29014 direct hire positions across the Department), down from 4.3% in FY 2011, while the requested funding for the bureau remained nearly the same as a portion of total requested funds by the State Department in FY 2011.¹⁶

Meanwhile, the total number of positions in SCA in the FY 2024 request was 99 less than FY 2011, while the requested appropriation declined by \$763.6 million.¹⁷ The share of requested positions for SCA comprised about 2% of the total of all requested positions, a drop from the 3.6% in FY 2011. The relative drop in funding was even more remarkable as SCA funds in FY 2024 comprised just over 1% of all requested State Department funds, compared with nearly 6% in FY 2011.¹⁸ A clarification is in order, however; these reductions are almost entirely attributable to the end of the U.S. war in Afghanistan and the closing of the U.S. Embassy in Kabul, which for many of these years was the largest U.S. Embassy in



the world. Given the size of its population and economy and its importance to U.S. strategic goals, the most important country covered by SCA is India, which did see an increase in the number of requested positions based in the United States dedicated to the country.¹⁹ Yet, the number of positions in the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi, as well as in the consulates in Chennai, Hyderabad, Kolkata, and Mumbai declined between FY 2011 and FY 2024.

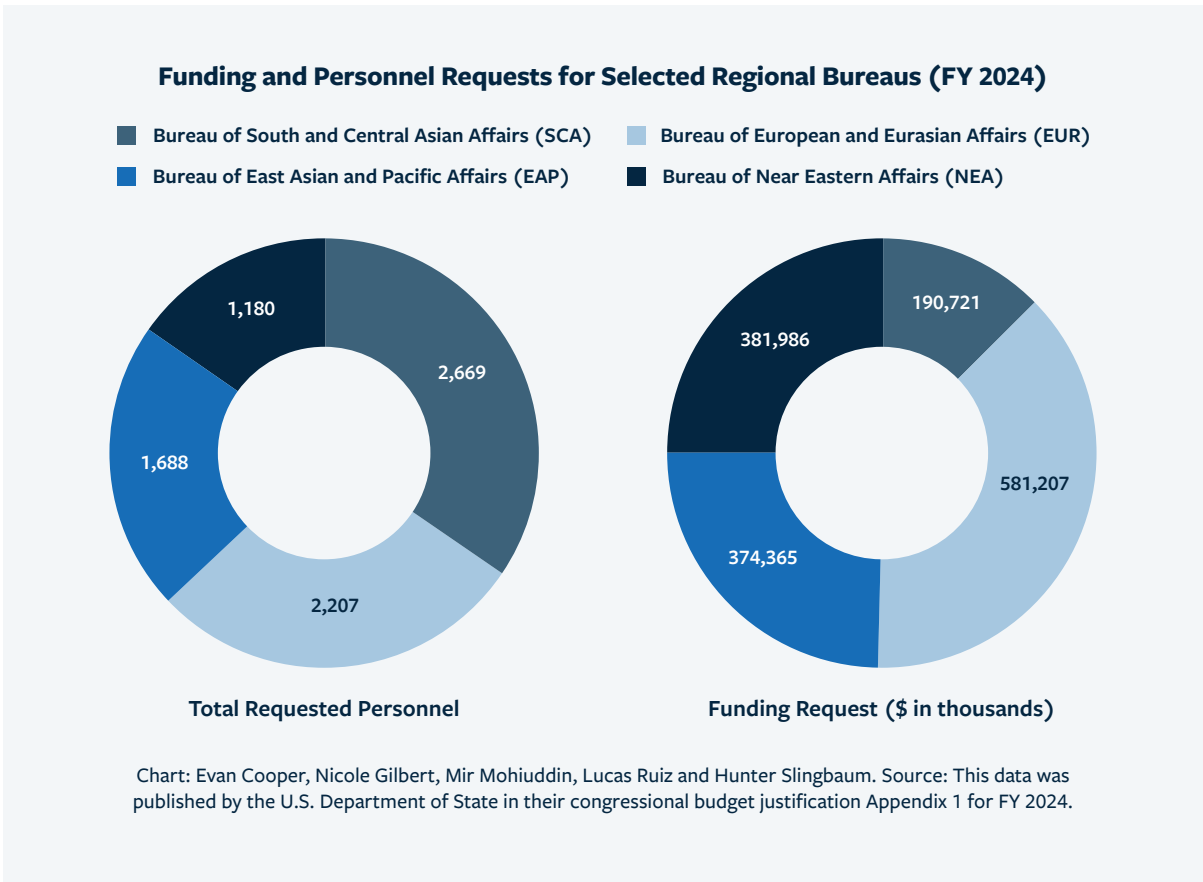
Although State Department modernization efforts, particularly surrounding the Department's technology and information sharing systems, have enabled more overseas support functions to be performed at regional hubs or from the United States, in-country positions that develop networks and understand local conditions cannot be replaced. These connections are what provide the context to identify opportunities for U.S. engagement and convey important information to U.S. policymakers back home. Exacerbating this issue is that the number of requested foreign service national (FSN) positions in embassies has generally declined.²⁰



In the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi, the number of FSN dropped from 182 positions in FY 2011 to 80 in FY 2024.²¹ These FSNs are the staff who enable U.S. diplomats to carry out their mission, providing services to maintain posts, processing payments, handling inventory, and facilitating transportation. Thus, a significant reduction in FSNs means reduced embassy operations. So, while there has been an increased focus on India as a critical part of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy, the actual expansion of the State Department’s footprint has been meager, which will be discussed in greater depth in the case study portion.

Given that there have been more than 10,000 new positions requested and a larger budget for the State Department since the announcement of the Pivot to Asia, it is particularly revealing to compare the changes in the requests for personnel and funding for EAP and SCA with the regional bureaus that cover the two regions where U.S. foreign policy has historically been most focused: Europe and the Middle East.

The February 2022 invasion of Ukraine has posed an acute challenge, adding an additional burden to the already significant diplomatic workload routinely carried out between the United States and its European partners. The Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs (EUR) has consistently been the largest of the regional bureaus, comprising 8.2% of all State Department positions in the FY 2011 request, with its budget accounting for 4.5% of the overall requested funds. In FY 2024, EUR comprised only 5.6% of the State Department’s requested positions and 3.3% of funds.²² Despite the war in Ukraine, the number of positions requested for EUR did not change between FY 2021 and FY 2024.



The Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs (NEA) experienced the largest staffing increases of any of the regional bureaus during the U.S. war in Iraq and the early days of the Global War on Terror. However, that changed after 2010 as the U.S. footprint in the Middle East began to shrink. In the FY 2011 request, NEA's positions comprised 4.5% of the total positions in the Department.²³ That figure has steadily declined, reaching only 3.2% in FY 2024. Notably, the requested funds for NEA have increased as a proportion of the total over that period, although only by half a percent, meaning the Department expects higher costs per position.²⁴

While there is no discounting the importance of Europe for U.S. diplomacy, the regions in which U.S. leaders have consistently advocated for greater engagement do not have the number of diplomats dedicated to them that a forward-leaning diplomatic engagement strategy should entail.

What is particularly notable about the regional bureaus is how the countries covered by each differ in terms of population, geographic area, and strategic importance to the United States. The countries covered by SCA and EAP encompass the majority of the world's population, the most significant competitor to the United States (China), and five of the United States' top 10 trading partners.²⁵ Yet, the combined positions in EAP and SCA for the FY 2024 request (1,587) are still lower than the total for EUR (1,620).²⁶ The figures differ little from FY 2011, which saw 1,475 positions between EAP and SCA compared with 1,551 in EUR.²⁷ While there is no discounting the importance of Europe for U.S. diplomacy, the regions in which U.S. leaders have consistently advocated for greater engagement do not have the number of diplomats dedicated to them that a forward-leaning diplomatic engagement strategy should entail. The growth of the State Department's budget and personnel since 2011 has mostly gone into management and functional bureaus. The creation of the Department's Bureau of Cyberspace and Digital Policy and expansion of its human resource and information technology components, for example, have driven much of the staff and funding increases of the Department over the 14-year period. These are important and necessary functions but have not significantly grown the foundation of U.S. overseas diplomatic engagement.

Case Studies

Although the overall figures of requested positions and funding do not reflect the rhetorical importance given to the region by U.S. leaders, an increased diplomatic footprint in all countries in EAP and SCA would not necessarily be strategically shrewd. The United States may not secure significant results from placing additional staff in Mongolia, while more diplomats in Indonesia could help fortify ties between the countries. Though the Biden administration has produced a regional strategy, U.S. diplomacy is conducted primarily on a bilateral basis. Given that reality, it is worthwhile to take a snapshot of some of the countries that are of particular strategic importance for the Indo-Pacific Strategy. The five countries selected were chosen because of their status as non-ally countries with which the United States has attempted to improve ties. They also represent a range in sizes and military and diplomatic capabilities, from India to the Marshall Islands. This is intended to capture the scope and scale of the U.S. diplomatic approach in the region.

Beyond the State Department's staffing numbers, the researchers considered four other aspects of U.S. diplomatic outreach to these countries: foreign assistance, high-level trips, ambassadorial appointments, and foreign college students hosted by U.S. universities. Foreign assistance is a clear demonstration of a continuing U.S. commitment to a country and is often leveraged to improve diplomatic ties. High-level trips by U.S. presidents and secretaries of state are diplomacy in action and usually signal priority attention, often resulting in new agreements or statements of intent to cooperate between the United States and the particular country.²⁸ The sustained presence of U.S. ambassadors, given some of the stand offs between administrations and Congress over nominations and the time taken for confirmations, along with whether the appointee is a career foreign service officer (FSO) or comes from outside the State Department, are important indicators of how diplomatic relationships are being managed. Ambassadors are the highest-ranking diplomats, and a prolonged absence in a given country can have negative repercussions. Student exchanges, particularly the welcoming of students to U.S. universities, are an indicator of both cultural ties between the countries and a proxy for measuring a foreign public's sentiment toward the United States.²⁹ These four metrics, taken together, are meant to provide a sense of how U.S. diplomatic outreach to key countries has changed since 2011, how such efforts might continue to change, and the extent to which a focused diplomatic pivot to the Indo-Pacific region has occurred.

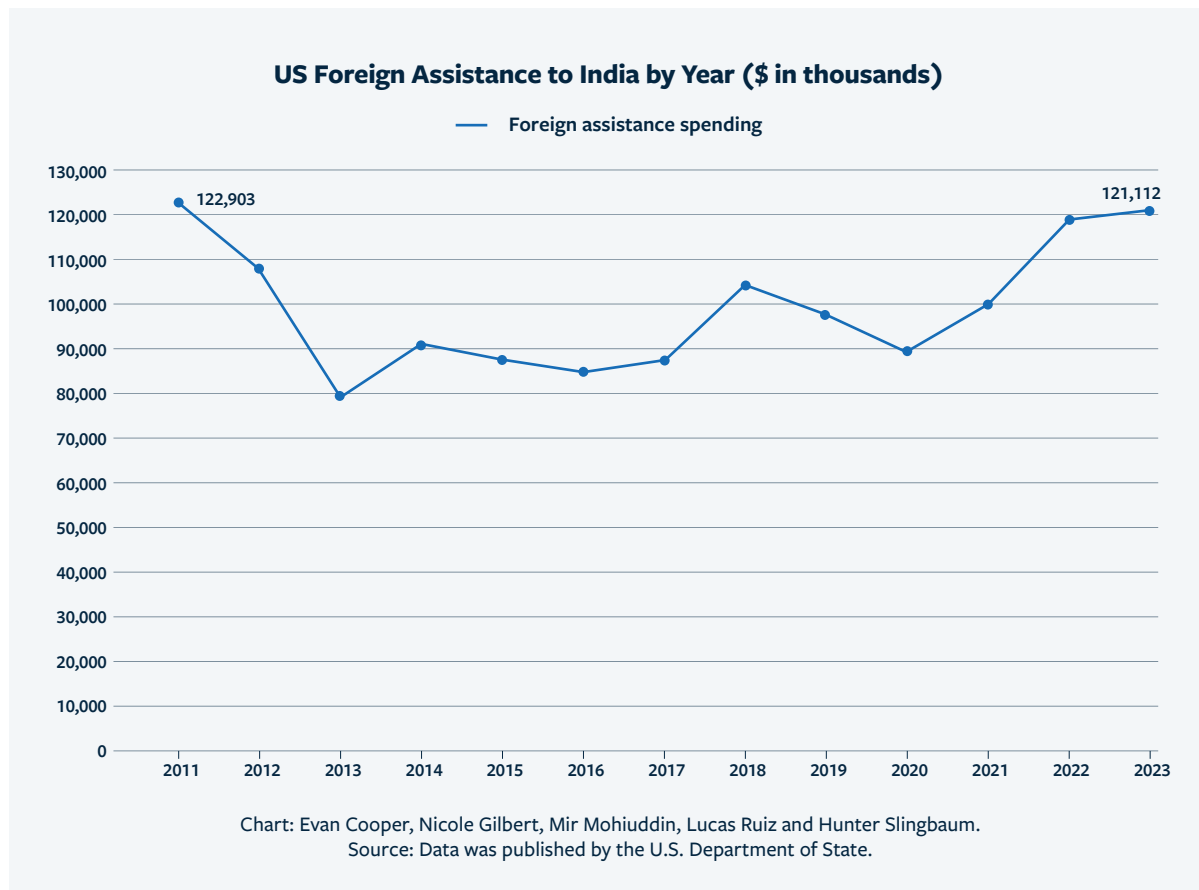
India

India has been the subject of significant U.S. diplomatic outreach, and for good reason. Not only is it a major trading partner and cultural superpower, but it is also an increasingly important security partner — a role that was recognized with the U.S. government's renaming of its Pacific Command to Indo-Pacific Command in 2018 and subsequent adoption of the term Indo-Pacific by government agencies.³⁰ But

while the United States has enjoyed a broadly friendly relationship with India during the past couple of decades, New Delhi does not closely align with Washington on some major issues.³¹ This reality has led to a substantial diplomatic push that included a state visit by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to the United States in 2023, during which Modi and U.S. President Joe Biden announced a sweeping set of agreements to expand diplomatic, security, and economic ties.³²

As mentioned earlier in this report, the State Department's positions for American personnel have not changed substantially since FY 2011. At the embassy in New Delhi — as well as the consulates in Hyderabad, Kolkata, and Mumbai — the number of positions in the FY 2024 request were each one lower than in FY 2011, and two lower for the consulate in Chennai.³³ The overall number of in-country staff will increase when two additional U.S. consulates are opened this year, in Bengaluru and Ahmedabad, but the lackluster staffing in the existing facilities is demonstrative of a diplomatic outreach strategy that is not reliant on increasing the State Department's footprint in the country.

Likewise, U.S. diplomatic outreach has evolved to recognize India's increasing role in the global economy. Given India's substantial economic growth in the last few decades, U.S. direct foreign assistance has declined, albeit only slightly.³⁴ India, now the 9th largest U.S. trade partner, is focused far more on trade and lowering barriers to technology transfers, which remains a point of contention in the US-India relationship.³⁵ However, following the 2023 summit between President Biden and Prime Minister Modi, the two countries resolved some important outstanding disagreements over agricultural trade. Moreover,



the decision by the United States to permit the sharing of advanced jet engine technology with India has been seen by some observers as facilitating the transfer of more advanced technologies in the near future.³⁶

U.S. policymakers have made more high-level visits to India than to any of the other four Indo-Pacific countries profiled here. Since 2011, 17 trips have been made by either the sitting U.S. president or the secretary of state.³⁷ All three presidents made one trip to India during their administrations, each meeting with Prime Minister Modi, a clear sign of the importance of the bilateral relationship. A U.S. secretary of state has traveled there every year since 2012 (except for 2022) — another demonstration of Washington’s desire to maintain strong diplomatic ties.

Nonetheless, India has been subject to the worst case of ambassadorial absence by the United States of any post. For such a strategically important country, it is remarkable that there was no ambassador in place for nearly six years during the past decade.³⁸ From the time that Amb. Nancy Jo Powell left the post in 2014, it was 1,343 days until Amb. Kenneth Juster assumed office during the Trump administration. The time to confirm Amb. Juster after his nomination was rapid — less than a month. The opposite occurred with the Biden administration’s nominee, Eric Garcetti. Although his name was put forward on July 13, 2021, he was not confirmed until March 15, 2023, ultimately leaving the post vacant for another 841 days. Part of the reason for the long gaps between ambassadors was unrelated political disputes between Administrations and key members of Congress over political appointees that had little or nothing to do with India.³⁹

Student exchange programs with India are a bright spot in the relationship. In the 2022-23 school year, 268,923 Indians studied in U.S. colleges.⁴⁰ This constituted not just a rebound, but a significant growth in the number of Indian students in the United States from prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The number of Indian students hosted by the United States is nearly three times greater than in 2011.

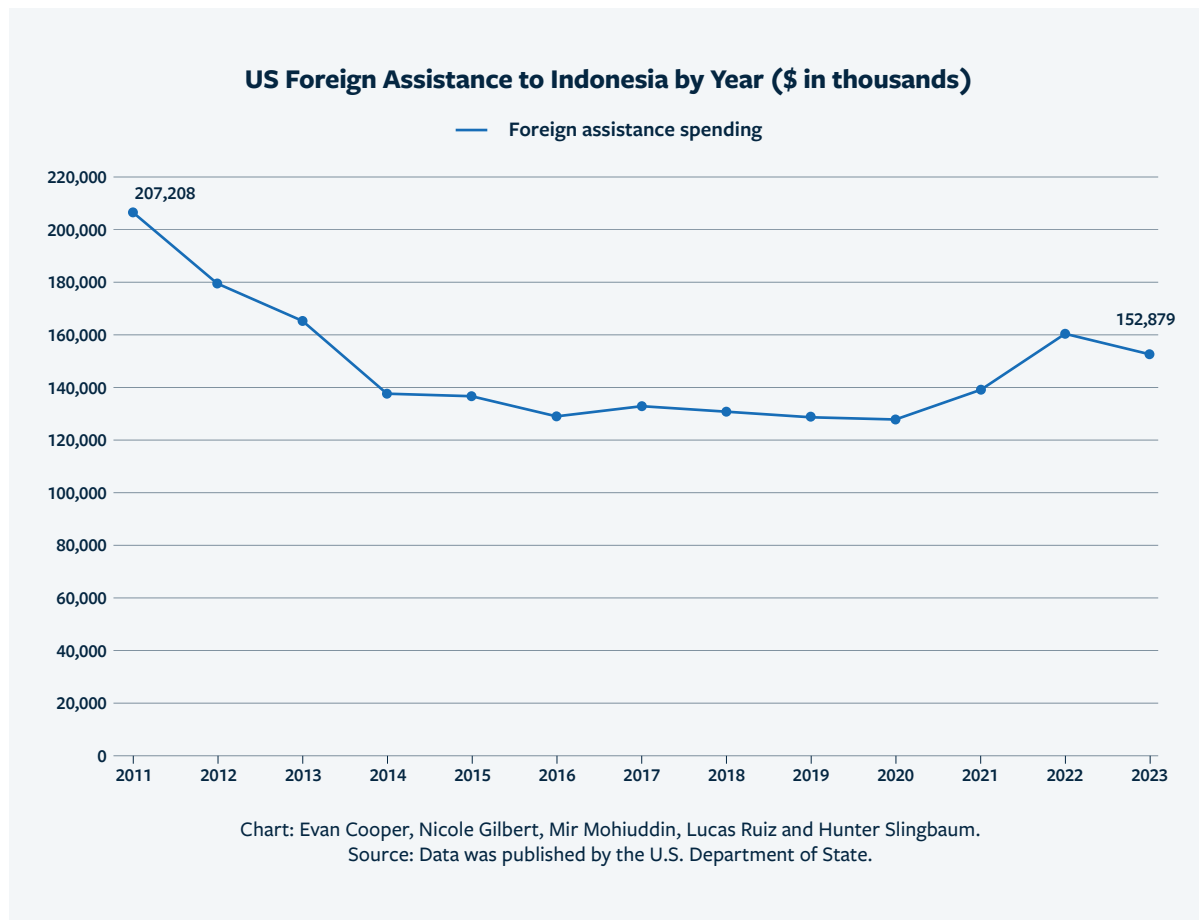
U.S. diplomatic relations with India have deepened since 2011. The opening of the two additional consulates in 2024 will further US-India ties, as will the continually growing trade and cultural exchanges between the two countries. Both consulates will be in major, strategically important cities; Bengaluru, widely considered India’s tech hub, and Ahmedabad, the largest city in Gujarat and its commercial hub.⁴¹ Summits between U.S. and Indian leaders have yielded significant agreements on trade, technology, and climate issues. But the domestic political impediments to ambassadorial confirmations, as well as outstanding differences over technology transfers and trade, means that major diplomatic successes may be more difficult to achieve than otherwise hoped.

Indonesia

As the second-largest U.S. partner country in the Indo-Pacific by population, and one that holds immense strategic importance, Indonesia has been subject to significant U.S. diplomatic outreach. The Biden administration pledged to strengthen its relationship with Jakarta in its Indo-Pacific Strategy, and elevated ties between the two countries in 2023 with the announcement of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.⁴² This agreement was mostly the result of a major diplomatic push made during the first two years of the Biden administration because U.S. diplomatic outreach during the Trump administration was muted. Although there are some signs of an increased U.S. diplomatic footprint in Indonesia, the selected metrics show a mixed picture.

The FY 2024 request includes a total of 65 direct-hire positions between the embassy in Jakarta (63) and the consulate in Medan (2).⁴³ The U.S. Mission to ASEAN post, which is based in Indonesia, has an additional two positions.⁴⁴ This is a significant expansion from the FY 2011 request, which called for 45 positions in Jakarta and four additional posts split between the consulate in Medan and the Consulate General office in Surabaya.⁴⁵

U.S. foreign assistance to Indonesia has decreased from \$207.2 million to \$152.8 million since 2011.⁴⁶ This decline has been commensurate with Indonesia's economic development and steadily increasing trade with the United States since the two countries signed the 1996 Trade and Investment Bilateral Framework.⁴⁷



Both the Biden and Obama administration officials made multiple high-level trips to Indonesia, but there was far less outreach under the Trump administration. In total, 14 trips were made by U.S. presidents and secretaries of state over the three administrations. Only two of those occurred during the Trump administration; Secretary of State Mike Pompeo made visits in 2018 and 2020. Presidents Obama and Biden both traveled to Indonesia for multilateral convenings: Obama (who spent part of his childhood in Jakarta) visited in 2011 for an ASEAN meeting, and Biden traveled there in 2022 for the G-20 Summit.⁴⁸

The U.S. Embassy in Jakarta is another posting that has gone significant periods without an ambassador in place, even though recent nominees to the position have all been career FSOs. Amb. Joseph Donovan was

nominated and confirmed during the Obama administration, serving through the Trump administration. It took 230 days for the new ambassador to assume the office, despite having been nominated prior to Amb. Donovan's leaving the post in February 2020.⁴⁹ Amb. Kamala Shirin Lakhdhir was nominated by President Biden in October 2023 but was not confirmed until May 2024. The timely nominations by administrations and their decisions to nominate career FSOs demonstrate a recognition of the importance of Indonesia and the desire for steady hands, but Congress, often for domestic political reasons, has been reluctant to swiftly approve nominees.

Despite having the fourth-largest population in the world, Indonesia does not send many students to the United States.⁵⁰ This is an area ripe for increased attention: only 8,467 Indonesians studied in the United States in the 2022-23 academic year, a slight decline from the peak of 8,727 students in the 2016-17 academic year.⁵¹ The small numbers of Indonesian students in the United States relative to Indonesia's total population, and the low figures in absolute terms, present an opportunity for the United States to expand ties and facilitate academic exchanges.

Notably, the U.S. security relationship with the Indonesian military has grown since 2011, furthering the need for diplomatic capacity that can ensure a stable relationship with the country. Indonesia's large population and geographical significance make it a key U.S. partner in the Indo-Pacific, and drove all four administrations to develop closer military ties, holding regular exercises and providing U.S. technical support.⁵² But Indonesia has not agreed to base U.S. troops within its borders, and as has been seen in other countries, such as the Philippines, support for deepened cooperation with the U.S. military can change quite rapidly and prove fodder for political parties.⁵³ Investment in the diplomatic relationship with Indonesia will be crucial if the United States hopes to continue to sustain or grow its military partnership with the country.

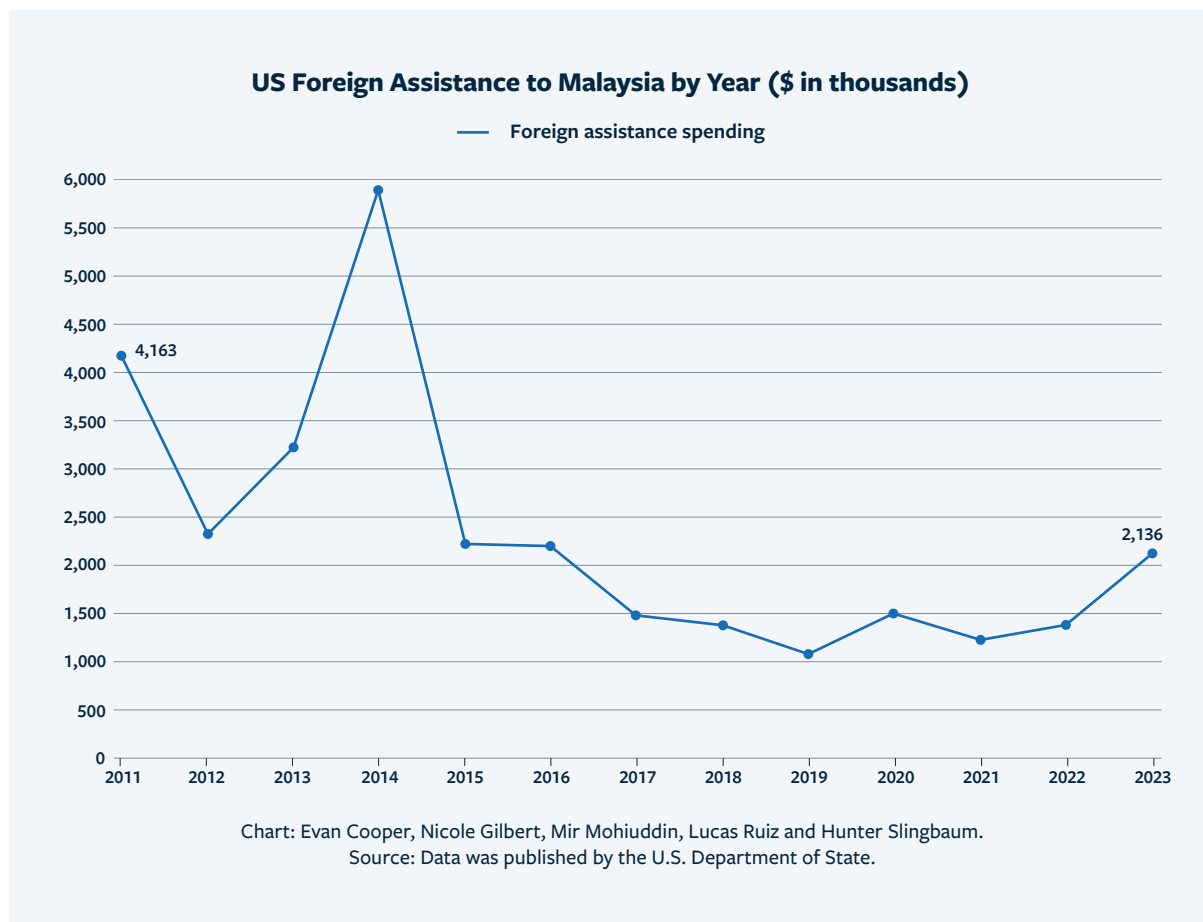
Malaysia

Malaysia is an interesting case of U.S. diplomacy because, while it is considered strategically important, it does not receive as much attention as other U.S. regional partners. Although it is mentioned as a key partner state in the Biden administration's Indo-Pacific Strategy, the U.S. diplomatic footprint within the country remains small, and there has not been a significant increase in outreach since the pivot to Asia was announced. This is despite the fact that the two countries signed a Comprehensive Partnership agreement in 2014 aimed at elevating ties between them.⁵⁴ It is worth noting that the United States has increased its diplomatic outreach to Malaysia and other Southeast Asian countries through ASEAN, which as previously noted has its own dedicated embassy. While U.S. efforts to engage with ASEAN have yielded significant agreements, including the upgrading of the relationship to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, it does not replace the value of bilateral ties.⁵⁵

The number of direct-hire State Department personnel in Malaysia has grown from 13 positions in FY 2011 to 24 in FY 2024. Nevertheless, the United States closed its consular office in Kota Kinabalu and now only maintains the embassy in Kuala Lumpur. Given that Malaysia is an island nation with a diffuse population, expanding the U.S. diplomatic footprint by opening additional consular offices could be particularly beneficial.

U.S. foreign assistance to Malaysia is remarkably low — nearly half of what it was in 2011 — though it has risen under Biden. Given Malaysia's level of development, increased foreign assistance might be

beneficial, particularly for promoting infrastructure development and trade. However, the impressive growth of U.S. trade with Malaysia over recent years demonstrates that economic ties between the two countries are strengthening. U.S. exports to Malaysia in 2022 were \$18.2 billion, up 20% from 2021 and up 42% from 2012.⁵⁶



High-level visits by U.S. leaders to Malaysia have been relatively infrequent. President Obama is the only U.S. president to visit since 2011, making a trip in 2014 to meet with Malaysia’s Prime Minister Dato’ Sri Mohd Najib Tun Abdul Razak; Obama traveled there again in 2015 for a gathering of ASEAN leaders.⁵⁷ Perhaps in part because Malaysia has not received significant U.S. diplomatic attention, substantial gaps between U.S. ambassadors to the country have not occurred. All four that have served in Kuala Lumpur since 2011 have been career FSOs, with confirmation of the most recent, Amb. Edgard Kagan, taking the longest at 189 days.⁵⁸

Similarly to Indonesia, the number of Malay students studying in the United States is both low and decreasing. The numbers peaked in the 2017-18 school year at 8,271 but have since declined: only 4,973 Indonesians studied in the U.S. during the 2022-23 academic year.⁵⁹ Greater efforts to establish relationships with academic institutions could bolster US-Malaysian ties over the longer term.

Although Washington has made a notable effort to expand its military cooperation with Malaysia, with several combined exercises between the two countries' militaries over the past couple of years, a similar deepening of diplomatic ties has not occurred.⁶⁰ Given the outsized economic relationship between the United States and Malaysia, as well as the existing security cooperation between the two countries, Malaysia serves as a primary example of a country where the United States should consider expanding its diplomatic footprint.

Vietnam

Vietnam has been a major focus of U.S. diplomatic efforts to counter China, which partially explains why the Biden administration elevated the relationship between the U.S. and Vietnam to a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2023.⁶¹

The changes in personnel numbers from FY 2011 and FY 2024 do not mirror the general trend of closer bilateral relations, however. The FY 2011 request included 48 direct-hire positions between Hanoi (31) and Ho Chi Minh City (17), while the FY 2024 request included just 50 total, with 34 for the embassy in Hanoi and 16 for Ho Chi Minh City.⁶² Moreover, the funding for the embassy in Hanoi declined by \$811,000 over this period.

U.S. foreign assistance to Vietnam did increase substantially, however, peaking in 2022 at \$210,789,000 — 60% higher than in 2011. U.S. trade with Vietnam also grew significantly during that period, up 146% in 2022 compared with a decade prior.⁶³ In addition to its bilateral trade agreement with the United States, which was signed in 2007, trade between the two countries has benefited from Vietnam's participation in the World Trade Organization, which it joined the same year.⁶⁴

Fifteen high-level trips have been made by U.S. presidents and secretaries of state to Vietnam since 2011, with each of the three presidents making visits to the country. President Trump made two visits to Vietnam, once in 2017 for the APEC Summit and the second in 2019 for his summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un.⁶⁵ Secretary of State John Kerry traveled to Vietnam in 2013, the year the comprehensive partnership between the countries was established; in 2015; and again in 2016, demonstrating a clear push for closer diplomatic ties with the country.⁶⁶ In 2016, Kerry accompanied President Obama, who announced the end of the longstanding U.S. arms embargo against Vietnam during his visit.⁶⁷ Secretary Blinken traveled to Vietnam this year following a multilateral convening in Laos, making a previously unscheduled stop to pay his respects following the death of the longtime leader of Vietnam's Communist party, Nguyen Phu Trong.⁶⁸

On the other hand, the trend of confirmation times for U.S. ambassadors to Vietnam tells a concerning story about how the Senate has complicated U.S. outreach efforts. The turnover between the ambassador to Vietnam under the Obama administration, Amb. Ted Osius, and Donald Trump's nominee, Amb. Daniel Kritenbrink, took just two days. However, it took eight months for President Biden's nominee, Amb. Marc Knapper, to be confirmed by the Senate, leading to the post going empty for 302 days.⁶⁹ As elsewhere, the holdup was due to a domestic political standoff: Amb. Knapper was only confirmed after Democrats struck a deal with Sen. Ted Cruz to lift his hold on 32 nominees in exchange for a vote on the decision to waive sanctions on Nord Stream 2.⁷⁰

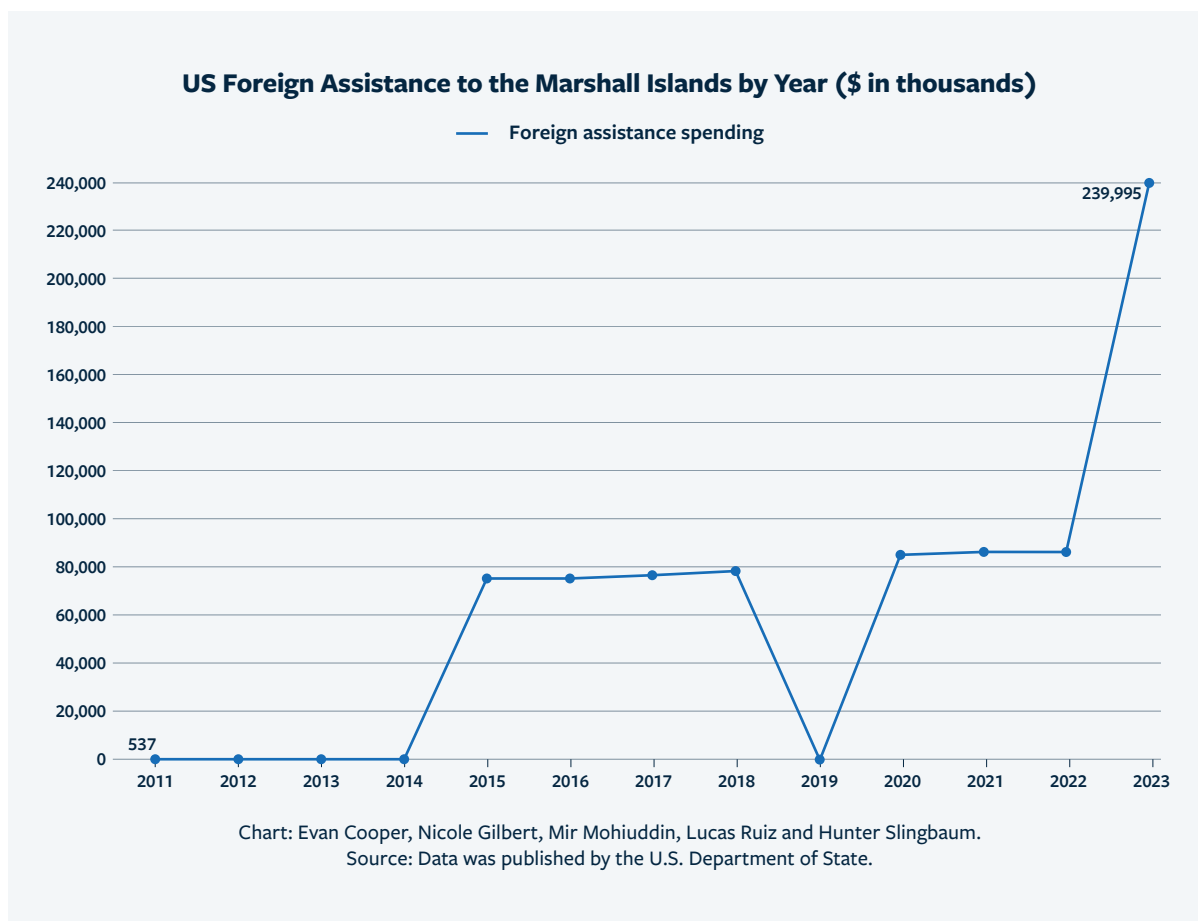
The number of Vietnamese students studying in the United States is a bright spot in US-Vietnam diplomatic relations. Although the number of Vietnamese students has not fully rebounded to pre-pandemic levels, which peaked at 24,392 students in 2018-19, it remains significantly higher than in the 2011-12 academic year. The 2022-23 school year saw 21,900 Vietnamese students pursue education in the United States, compared with 15,572 in 2011-12. A concerted diplomatic effort could elevate student exchanges beyond pre-pandemic levels.

Vietnam is a significant component of the Biden administration's Indo-Pacific Strategy and is a remarkable example of what sustained diplomacy can accomplish. From solidifying the comprehensive partnership in 2013 to the lifting of the arms embargo in 2016 and further elevation of the relationship to a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2023, the case of US-Vietnam relations shows that partnerships can advance significantly in a relatively short period. This requires not just an alignment of interests — as illustrated by the United States' and Vietnam's common goals on issues like trade and countering China's expansion and environmental exploitation in the region — but also through an investment of diplomatic capital to build from those alignments. An increase of diplomatic positions in Vietnam could yield improved understanding of a critical country with complicated relations with China, as well as deeper economic and cultural ties.

Marshall Islands

U.S. outreach toward the Marshall Islands is complex and reveals the importance of a diplomatic approach being backstopped by domestic political support. As a Compact of Free Association (COFA) country, the Marshall Islands is independent but has historically had close ties with the United States. However, a delay by Congress in renewing COFA created an opening for the island nation to develop closer relations with China, which caused concern in Washington that the United States could eventually lose crucial basing access.⁷¹ During this delay, President of the Marshall Islands Hilda Heines made clear that the country's long history with the United States did not guarantee that close ties would continue, stating, "At some point, our nation needs to seriously consider other options available to us if the U.S. is unable or unwilling to keep its commitments to us. Our nation has been a steadfast ally of the United States, but that should not be taken for granted."⁷²

The Biden administration has offered up economic incentives for the Marshall Islands to stay firmly in the orbit of the United States, which is apparent in the foreign assistance figures. In 2023, the United States provided \$239.9 million in foreign assistance to the small island nation, a 176% increase from the previous year.⁷³ Much of this funding is backfilling U.S. commitments that were delayed owing to congressional inaction, but the sum nonetheless represents a remarkable use of foreign assistance as a diplomatic tool. This foreign assistance combines traditional funding, including infrastructure and development projects, along with the administration of basic services by U.S. entities, such as mail being delivered by the U.S. Postal Service.⁷⁴



U.S. diplomatic outreach to the Marshall Islands looks significantly different from the other case-study countries because much of the country’s government services are integrated into U.S. bureaucratic structures through COFA. The United States does maintain an embassy in Majuro, which has five direct-hire positions. That is an expansion from the two positions listed in the FY 2011 request. U.S. schools host a handful of Marshallese students each year, but the main educational exchange is through the Department of Interior’s Close Up program, which brings upwards of 100 Marshallese high school students to study in the United States each year.⁷⁵

A similarity between the Marshall Islands and other independent countries is that the ambassadorial post has recently been unfilled for a long period of time. This occurred despite the concern among policymakers that the Marshall Islands could fall into China’s orbit, again demonstrating the increasingly contradictory relationship between domestic U.S. politics and Washington’s diplomatic strategy. Amb. Laura Stone, a career FSO, was nominated to be the ambassador to the Marshall Islands in July 2023, but was not confirmed until May 2024. The long period without an ambassador to the Marshall Islands had not been an issue in prior administrations.

While U.S. leaders rarely travel to the Marshall Islands, engagement with the country and some of its Pacific Island neighbors has been central to the broader Pivot to Asia project. In 2012, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton attended the Pacific Islands Forum in the Cook Islands, which marked the first time

a secretary of state had attended the gathering since its founding in 1971. Her attendance was at the time reported as marking the beginning of the United States implementing its Pivot to Asia.⁷⁶ The Biden administration has sought to expand cooperation with the grouping of Pacific Island nations, hosting the Pacific Islands Country Summit in 2022 and the US-Pacific Island Forum Leaders Summit a year later.⁷⁷ In the run-up to the 2022 Summit, the State Department highlighted that it had “increased its staffing in the Pacific Islands in the last five years to improve our ability to connect with our neighbors in the region” and pledged to further expand its footprint.⁷⁸ It has done so in the two years since, opening new embassies in the Maldives, Tonga, the Seychelles, Vanuatu, and the Solomon Islands.⁷⁹

China

Given that competition with China has been the greatest motivating factor of the U.S. Pivot to Asia, it serves as a revealing counterpoint to analyze how the United States has adjusted its diplomatic footprint in China, using the same metrics as with the countries that the United States seeks to improve relations with. Contemporary U.S. diplomacy toward China has not sought to draw China closer into the orbit of the United States, but instead has sought to prevent it from becoming a dominating force in the Indo-Pacific. In fact, this approach has also animated an important element of U.S. diplomacy around the world and particularly in Asia.

The United States has provided minimal foreign assistance to China since 2011, and such assistance is not a significant component of U.S. diplomatic outreach to the country; rather, trade is at the heart of the relationship. U.S. trade with China has grown significantly since 2011, but it is also a major point of contention both within U.S. domestic politics and between the two countries.⁸⁰ While analysis of the trading relationship with China is outside the remit of this paper, China is the U.S.’s largest trading partner and the past fifteen years have been characterized by increasing tariffs and other trade barriers on both sides. It is therefore not surprising that much of the recent diplomacy between the two countries has been conducted in the economic sphere. U.S. Secretary of the Treasury Janet Yellen has made multiple trips to China, conducting “intensive diplomacy” in order to “responsibly manage the bilateral economic relationship and advance American interests.”⁸¹ U.S. Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo also traveled to China last year and has facilitated significant U.S. diplomatic outreach between the two countries.⁸²

But while U.S. Cabinet-level officials have made important trips to China during the Biden administration, travel by U.S. secretaries of state and U.S. presidents since 2011 has trended downward along with the bilateral relationship.⁸³ President Obama traveled to China in both 2014 and 2016, first for the APEC Summit and then for a G-20 Summit.⁸⁴ Hillary Clinton traveled once to China in 2011 as Secretary of State and twice more in 2012. Secretary of State John Kerry made nine trips to China in 2013-16. That compares with just six trips made by Secretaries of State Rex Tillerson, Mike Pompeo, and Antony Blinken in 2017-23.⁸⁵ President Trump visited China for three days in 2017 but did not make any more trips to the region, as relations between the countries soured in the subsequent years.⁸⁶ As COVID-era travel bans subsided, the Biden administration employed official trips by Cabinet-level officers to rebuild high-level relations with China, which led to a summit between Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping in San Francisco in 2023.⁸⁷ Biden has stressed the importance of his high-level diplomacy with Xi, saying in an interview with *Time*, “I’ve spent more time with Xi Jinping than any leader in the world, over 90 hours alone with him since I’ve been Vice President. And we have a very candid relationship.”⁸⁸

The ebbs and flows of diplomatic tensions between the United States and China are apparent in the figures of U.S. staffing in the embassies and consulates in China. In FY 2011, there were a total of 216 positions between the Beijing embassy and six additional consulates.⁸⁹ In 2024, that number dropped to 194, with one fewer consulate (the Chengdu location closed following the United States' closure of China's Houston consulate in 2020).⁹⁰ The number of positions in the FY 2024 request represented a slight increase from the 189 positions allocated in FY 2021 appropriations.⁹¹ Though the Biden administration implemented a reorganization of the State Department to bring together various elements of the Department that work on China, named the China House, this sensible reorganization did not entail substantial growth of in the number of U.S. diplomatic personnel in China.

The U.S. ambassador to China is an immensely consequential and difficult position. Recognizing this, President Biden nominated R. Nicholas Burns, who had an extensive career in the State Department, as ambassador to China in September 2021, and Burns was quickly confirmed. But the delay in putting Amb. Burns' name forward, and China's decision to close travel during the COVID-19 pandemic, meant that the post went unfilled for 544 days.⁹² This gap was in large part due to Senate infighting over a bill to ban imports related to the Xinjiang region in China and recognition that no nominee to the Beijing post would be confirmed until that issue was resolved.⁹³ The nomination of Amb. Burns constituted a shift in the U.S. approach to the ambassadorship because the previous three ambassadors had all come from a political background.

Student exchange programs between the United States and China are an important component of US-China relations. Despite tensions between the two countries, the number of Chinese students in the United States peaked at 369,548 in the 2018-19 academic year. This was a significant rise from the 194,029 students who studied in the United States in 2011-12.⁹⁴ While the Chinese student population in the United States has yet to recover to pre-pandemic levels, the 2022-23 school year saw 289,526 Chinese citizens enrolled in U.S. schools. More concerning is the precipitous drop in American students studying in China. In 2011-12, 14,887 American students studied in China. A decade later, just 211 Americans studied there.⁹⁵ This was driven mostly by China's closing access during the COVID-19 pandemic, but the number of U.S. students in China had been trending downward during the past decade and will struggle to recover unless a major effort is made to facilitate Americans studying in the country.

The United States has not employed a consistent diplomatic approach toward Beijing, which is evidence of competing domestic U.S. political goals and directions, underscoring a lack of a broader, consistent strategy for managing the rise of China. Each administration has sought different ways to engage China; Obama used traditional U.S. diplomacy, the Trump administration vacillated between pledges of cooperation and economic punishment, and the Biden administration has pursued Cabinet-level diplomacy while continuing the punitive economic measures taken under Trump. Amidst this inconsistent approach, ground-level diplomacy has not been given a substantial role. That is not to say that American diplomats are not conducting serious work in China, but clarification of the broader U.S. diplomatic strategy is necessary for any expansion of the U.S. diplomatic footprint to occur.

Recommendations

Interviews with current and former State Department personnel, congressional staff, and academic experts elucidated a range of suggestions for how a successful diplomatic pivot to Asia, and broader strategic flexibility by the State Department, should be pursued. These recommendations break down into two categories: (1) changes to State Department structure and processes and (2) policy changes that require action by the White House and Congress. However, for any of these changes to occur, close coordination between all three entities will be required.

Changes at the Department of State

Although creating more positions and funding for State Department operations in Asia would help to boost the capabilities of U.S. diplomacy, it is far from a quick fix. The creation of positions in the region does not ensure that there will be staff available to fill them. For FSOs in particular, intensive qualification and language training (three of the four designated hardest languages are in the EAP region) is needed to be eligible for a given opening. Second, many posts in the region are hardship posts, and while these positions do pay more, they are considered hardship posts for a reason.⁹⁶ As is the case with many regions that U.S. diplomats serve, many posts in the Indo-Pacific make it difficult, bordering on impossible, for FSOs to bring family members to accompany them, which has been cited as a reason for declining FSO retention and growing employee dissatisfaction.⁹⁷

The need for a long-term sustained diplomatic focus on a region depends on knowledgeable, networked, and experienced practitioners. With one to two-year assignments and dedication to generalist officers, the current State Department career tracks and assignment patterns may be ill-suited to developing the requisite knowledge and trust so prized in Asia. The need clearly is for the development of a cadre of diplomats who can execute a long-term diplomatic strategy in a particular place or region. The current structure can impede making a strategic diplomatic pivot as FSOs invariably have to be rotated out of posts as they become more knowledgeable and acquainted with the particular nuances of the place. For strategically critical countries, the Foreign Service might consider incentivizing longer postings, while still putting a cap in place to avoid the development of fiefdoms or imbalanced career tracks.

Although changing the foundational structure of the Foreign Service would have wide-reaching consequences, smaller changes could improve agility and enable a broader diplomatic pivot. One model is the Consular Fellows program, which has non-career appointments of up to five years for candidates who speak select languages to assist with visa processing.⁹⁸ This hiring of employees outside of career positions allows for targeted and quicker recruitment of personnel and can be used to address some

pressing problems. A larger proposal to address the burden on the State Department from acute diplomatic challenges is the development of a diplomatic reserve corps.⁹⁹ The creation of a diplomatic reserve corps would enable the Department to surge diplomatic assets to address emergency incidents, such as the evacuation of Afghanistan or the invasion of Ukraine, while allowing staff dedicated to longer-term diplomatic challenges to remain focused on their region and topics. A reserve corps could enable execution of diplomatic strategy over a longer period of time, mitigating the strains posed by inevitable crises.

Similarly modeled on an aspect of the U.S. military's approach to career development and retention, the expansion of the training float for the Foreign Service would facilitate greater education and training of FSOs without creating gaps in key posts. A training float allows a portion of officers to receive dedicated professional training without having to leave important postings vacant. While the Department was able to introduce a long-sought training float in 2022 through increased hiring of FSOs, it remains small and is threatened by budget cuts and the shrinking of new FSO classes.¹⁰⁰ Currently, about 13% of posts remain unfilled; an expanded training float would help to address that gap.¹⁰¹

A posture review would help the Department analyze how it is advancing the administration's regional strategy, making adjustments within the region and the larger Department accordingly.

One proposed tool to help an administration and the State Department shift its diplomatic footprint would be to institute a diplomatic posture review.¹⁰² If enacted, this instrument would mandate that the State Department conduct a regular and consistent analysis of its diplomatic posture and adjust it to fit the strategic priorities of the administration, with congressional oversight of the process. A posture review would help the Department analyze how it is advancing the administration's regional strategy, making adjustments within the region and the larger Department accordingly. Given the expressed prioritization of the Indo-Pacific region by the Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations, a vigorous evaluation of the State Department's posture would most likely identify personnel in other regional bureaus who could be moved to capitalize on diplomatic opportunities in the Indo-Pacific region.

Changes Outside the Department

As is seen with some of the case-study examples, the time it takes Congress to confirm ambassadors has risen during the past decade, and important posts remain empty.¹⁰³ This is mostly due to senators putting holds on nominations, but it is also impacted by slow vetting by the White House, particularly of political nominees.¹⁰⁴ The effect of unfilled ambassador positions is not limited to the functioning of a handful of embassies — it disrupts a key feedback node for an administration developing and managing its foreign policy. Outside of reforms to Senate processes, which have been proposed but seem unlikely to go anywhere, the most effective action could be for the White House to prioritize appointing career FSOs as ambassadors and avoid political nominees. The number of political appointees serving as ambassadors has steadily increased over recent decades, with the Trump administration filling 44% of positions with political appointees and the Biden administration at 40%, compared to 26% under the Carter administration.¹⁰⁵

Even more critical to ensuring that a diplomatic pivot can take place is the need for Congress to set fiscal targets for diplomacy — specifically, State Department authorizations — in a timely fashion. The State Department has gone long periods operating under continuing resolutions or rollover omnibus appropriations, which prevents it from creating new positions and directing funding towards new programming in the region. For a pivot to be sustainable, the administration and Congress need to collaborate better on building budgets that are seen as reasonable and reflect how resourcing will advance the medium- to long-term diplomatic strategy, particularly for the Indo-Pacific. The inclusion of the Indo-Pacific Strategy as a component of the Biden administration’s budget justification starting in FY 2023 was a useful model that communicates how the budget directly connects to the strategy and should be continued.¹⁰⁶

For a pivot to be sustainable, the administration and Congress need to collaborate better on building budgets that are seen as reasonable and reflect how resourcing will advance the medium- to long-term diplomatic strategy, particularly for the Indo-Pacific.

Congress should avoid cutting educational exchange and language programs for short-term signaling reasons. The decision to eliminate the Chinese Fulbright program, which is a particularly egregious example, harms the ability of the United States to develop diplomats who are deeply knowledgeable about the country that the U.S. government has labeled the pacing challenge.¹⁰⁷ But while China is a country of particular importance to Washington, the United States also benefits from inculcating cultural expertise and language skills in FSOs working in other key countries, particularly in the Indo-Pacific. Doing so would increase the pool of available expertise and lower the training requirements for diplomatic staff going to the region. In addition, because educational exchange programs tend to bring students from Asia to the United States, rather than sending American students to the region, longer-term diplomatic benefits derive from helping educate the future politicians, executives, and community leaders of these countries. Doing so can improve their views of the United States, helping to combat stereotypes and biases.¹⁰⁸

Conclusion

The most important factor for a successful diplomatic pivot is a sustainable foreign policy strategy that embraces diplomacy as a core tenet. Although there has been bipartisan recognition of the importance of the Indo-Pacific since 2011, policymakers have not had a sustained focus on transforming the primary diplomatic tool of the United States — the State Department — to pursue U.S. interests most effectively in the region. Put another way, the failure to execute a diplomatic pivot is not primarily the fault of the State Department. The Department is an underutilized tool for advancing U.S. interests in the Indo-Pacific.

Though the State Department has grown in both personnel and funding since 2011, its footprint in Asia has not changed commensurate with the rhetorical importance placed on the region. Though the number of positions has expanded in select posts, the overall trend is most accurately described as stagnation. Likewise, the budgetary figures for the regional bureaus and posts often fail to even keep pace with inflation. While the focus of the modernization plan for the Department is laudable, it should not come at the price of focused and expanded regional engagement.¹⁰⁹

At the highest level, a confluence of issues prevents a successful diplomatic pivot to Asia, which include but are not limited to congressional obstinance, an over-focus on the military as the primary tool of U.S. foreign policy, and unclear strategic priorities of administrations pertaining to addressing the rise of China. In the face of this, the most productive action that a given administration can take is to communicate to the American people the value of diplomatic engagement for advancing U.S. interests in the region. Building a constituency for diplomacy will help ensure that sustained diplomatic engagement is possible; such a constituency would increase the likelihood that the State Department receives regular budgets, that those resources are suitably deployed, and that recruitment and retention of skilled diplomats is possible. Without broadened support for U.S. diplomacy in Asia, the United States will miss opportunities to advance its economic interests and risk escalation that stems from an overreliance on military-to-military relationships with countries in the region. Like any strategic shift, this will take time and patience, but the failure to successfully make a diplomatic pivot to Asia during the past decade has already cost the United States opportunities to build stronger partnerships and advance its interests in the region, and will continue to do so.

Endnotes

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- ² U.S. Department of Defense, *U.S. Indo-Pacific Command: Area of Responsibility* (Updated September 2023), <https://www.pacom.mil/About-USINDOPACOM/USPACOM-Area-of-Responsibility/>.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ There is not a commonly used definition of the Indo-Pacific. The author of this paper applies the term to the region covered by the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, which covers 38 nations; U.S. Department of Defense, *U.S. Indo-Pacific Command: Area of Responsibility*.
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- ¹⁰ Antony Blinken, “Secretary Blinken’s Remarks on a Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (13 December 2021), Office of the Spokesperson, U.S. Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/fact-sheet-secretary-blinkens-remarks-on-a-free-and-open-indo-pacific/>.
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- ¹⁴ For the purposes of this analysis, Foreign Service Nationals (FSNs) are excluded from the employment figures. These numbers only include direct-hire Foreign Service and Civil Service positions. For 2011 figures, see U.S. Department of State, Office of the Secretary of State, *Congressional Budget Justification, Vol. 1: Department of State Operations, Fiscal Year 2011*, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/136355.pdf>, Summary of Appropriations table, 8-9; Summary of Direct Funded Positions table, 12; For 2024, see U.S. Department of State, Office of the Secretary of State, *Congressional Budget Justification, Appendix 1: Department of State Diplomatic Engagement, Fiscal Year 2024*, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/508-compliant-FY-2024-CBJ-Appendix-1-Full-Documents-Proof-Review-Complete.pdf>, pp. 12-13, Summary of Appropriations table; U.S. Direct-Hire Funded Positions table, pp. 15-16.
- ¹⁵ State Department, *Congressional Budget Justification, Appendix 1, FY 2024*, p. 18.
- ¹⁶ State Department, *Congressional Budget Justification, Appendix 1, FY 2024, Detailed Resource Summary table*, pp. 176-77; State Department, *Congressional Budget Justification Volume 1, Resource Summary table*, p. 227.
- ¹⁷ State Department, *Congressional Budget Justification, FY 2011, Resource Summary table*, p. 215; State Department, *Congressional Budget Justification, Appendix 1, FY 2024, Detailed Resource Summary table*, p. 210.
- ¹⁸ State Department, *Congressional Budget Justification, Appendix 1, FY 2024, Detailed Resource Summary table*, p. 210; State Department, *Congressional Budget Justification, Volume 1, FY 2011, Resource Summary table*, p. 215.
- ¹⁹ State Department, *Congressional Budget Justification, Volume 1, FY 2011, Staff by Domestic Organization Unit table*, p. 218; State Department, *Congressional Budget Justification, Appendix 1, FY 2024, Staff and Funds by Domestic Organization Units table*, p. 211.

- ²⁰ The State Department has shifted to using the term “Locally Employed Staff” instead of Foreign Service Nationals. While Locally Employed Staff is a more inclusive and accurate term, this paper uses Foreign Service Nationals because it remains the term utilized in the budget documents.
- ²¹ State Department, *Congressional Budget Justification, Volume 1, FY 2011, Staff by Post table, p. 219*; State Department, *Congressional Budget Justification, Appendix 1, FY 2024, Staff and Funds by Post table, p. 211*.
- ²² Substantial emergency appropriations were passed in FY 2023 and FY 2024 for Ukraine, which did increase the total amount of funds administered by EUR but do not show up in these figures.
- ²³ State Department, *Congressional Budget Justification, Volume 1, FY 2011, Resource Summary table, pp. 203-04*.
- ²⁴ State Department, *Congressional Budget Justification, Appendix 1, FY 2024, Detailed Resource Summary table, p. 202*.
- ²⁵ “Top Trading Partners – October 2022,” (Suitland, Maryland: United States Census Bureau, Foreign Trade), <https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/statistics/highlights/top/top2210yr.html>.
- ²⁶ State Department, *Congressional Budget Justification, Appendix 1, FY 2024, Detailed Resource Summary table pp. 176-177*; Detailed Resource Summary table, p. 182; Detailed Resource Summary table, p. 210.
- ²⁷ State Department, *Congressional Budget Justification, Volume 1, FY 2011, Resource Summary table p. 215*; Resource Summary table, p. 227; Resource Summary table, p. 255.
- ²⁸ We are deeply grateful to the team at the Frederick S. Pardee Institute for International Futures for providing access to their Country and Organization Leader Travel (COLT) database. The database will be available at <https://korbel.du.edu/pardee/content/country-organization-leader-travel>.
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