



## **Hotspot Indo-Pacific: Situation Assessment and US Interests**

### **Interview Ralph D. Thiele with Dr Peter Roell**

**April 2021**

#### **Abstract**

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The present interview focuses for the most part on a confidential document approved by Donald Trump in February 2018 entitled “Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific.” In January 2021, the document was declassified and made publicly accessible.

While some passages have been redacted, the framework still affords insight into the situation assessment and North America’s core interests and objectives in the Indo-Pacific region.

The new US administration will be focusing on domestic policy – namely on tackling the Covid-19 pandemic and the economic crisis. Joe Biden and his Asian team in the NSC are set to adopt a hard-line stance towards the PRC. In contrast to his predecessor, however, Biden’s course will be deliberately incorporating US allies and partners. From Washington’s perspective, China poses the single most significant potential threat not only to the United States but also to the Western Hemisphere. In domains in which cooperation with China is meaningful, the USA will seek cooperation with Beijing, whereby Joe Biden will also be adopting an America First policy.

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## Interview

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**Thiele:** Dr Roell, in the wake of Joe Biden's inauguration as 46th President of the United States on 20 January 2021, I welcome the opportunity to discuss the Indo-Pacific region and, more particularly, the US appraisal of the situation in the region and Washington's stakes in the region. Do we have a clear definition of the term Indo-Pacific?

**Roell:** There is, indeed, no term that clearly defines the geographical compass of the Indo-Pacific region. The German government regards the Indo-Pacific as encompassing the entirety of the Indian Ocean and Pacific region, within which expansive strategic projections vie with each other and various other global value chains intertwine.

**Thiele:** Evidently, the new US administration will be focusing on domestic policy, namely, tackling the COVID-19 pandemic and the US economic crisis. Would you say that there is still sufficient scope for dealing intensively with developments in the Indo-Pacific?

**Roell:** With the appointment of Kurt Campbell to the White House National Security Council as future Coordinator for Indo-Pacific Affairs, the US government underscores the crucial importance of this geopolitically significant region. Campbell enjoys an excellent reputation on account of his scholarly achievements and senior posts in the civil service, all of which have centred on the Asia-Pacific region. His expertise on matters Asia is also highly esteemed by governments across the region.

**Thiele:** Donald Trump approved the classified document "Indo-Pacific Strategic Framework" in February 2018. By January 2021, the ten-page document was declassified and made publicly available. What would you say are the core US interests in the Indo-Pacific?

**Roell:** Among the US core interests in the region are the defence of the homeland and American citizens overseas; the prevention of nuclear proliferation and concomitant means of delivery; maintaining American economic, diplomatic and military access to the world's most populous region, home to more than one-third of the world's economy; improving the creditability and efficiency among US allies; maintaining US supremacy in the region while protecting American values and freedoms at home.

**Thiele:** What conclusions has the US drawn after having now established its core interests?

**Roell:** American security and prosperity are predicated on the free and unfettered access to the Indo-Pacific region, and thus remain the drivers for the US, both regionally, as well as with respect to global economic growth. They also make clear that shifts in the regional balance of power will fuel security rivalries across the Indo-Pacific region and thus result in greater defence spending in many countries, India and Japan among them.

Proliferation, maritime security, terrorism, and unsettled territorial disputes will remain primary security threats and sources of conflict. A loss of US pre-eminence in the Indo-Pacific would further weaken US capacity to advance its interests worldwide. Robust US-led alliances are pivotal in preventing conflicts and in furthering vital US interests.

**Thiele:** How does the US view the PRC and Beijing's interests?

**Roell:** In brief: Strategic rivalry between the United States and China is set to continue. To gain an advantage, China forges ahead in circumventing international regulations and norms; China seeks to erode US alliances and partnerships throughout the region; a strong India, in cooperation with like-minded countries, could serve as a



counterweight to China; China's economic, diplomatic and military leverage will continue to grow in the short term, challenging US capabilities in achieving its national interests in the Indo-Pacific region; China seeks supremacy in cutting-edge technologies, including artificial intelligence (AI) and bio-genetics.

Chinese prominence in these technologies is set to pose a significant challenge to free societies; China's greatly enhanced digital surveillance, information control as well as influence on operations will exert increasing damage on the US in its efforts to foster values and national interests within the Indo-Pacific region, as well as within the Western Hemisphere and North America; China is poised to take increasingly assertive measures to compel reunification with Taiwan.

The US assessment of Russia also deserves mention: when compared to the US, China and India, Russia will continue to be a marginal player.

**Thiele:** So, what are the US strategic objectives in cooperating with allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific region?

**Roell:** These include reinforcing the capabilities of Japan, South Korea and Australia and aligning them with strategic US objectives in the Indo-Pacific region; forging a security quadrilateral comprising India, Japan, Australia and the US (Quad) as principal nodes; deepening trilateral cooperation with Japan and Australia; encouraging South Korea to assume a greater role in security governance to extend beyond the Korean Peninsula; enabling Japan to become a regionally integrated, technologically advanced pillar in the Indo-Pacific security architecture; supporting Japan in the modernisation of its Self-Defence Forces (SDF).

**Thiele:** And how would you assess US support for the Philippines and Thailand?

**Roell:** Here, the USA aims at revitalising existing alliances and strengthening their role in maintaining rules-based order. This would also include development aid along with military cooperation.

**Thiele:** To what extent does the US intend to support Taiwan?

**Roell:** The aim here is to enable Taiwan to develop effective asymmetric defence strategies and capabilities to ensure its security, freedom and resilience, as well as its capacity to respond to China on its own terms.

**Thiele:** There have been positive developments regarding political, economic, and military relations between the United States of America and India. What would you say are the objectives regarding India, as outlined in the US document?

**Roell:** The objective is to expedite India's emergence and its capabilities as a net security and significant defence partner; to consolidate an enduring strategic partnership with India as underpinned by a robust Indian military which would be capable of both cooperating effectively with the United States and US partners across the region and of sharing common interests.

**Thiele:** Would you elaborate in greater detail as to how this might be realised?

**Roell:** The sheer range of measures underlines the importance Washington attaches to India. More specifically, these are: Laying a strengthened foundation in defence cooperation and enhanced interoperability; expanding defence ties and bolstering defence technology transfer capabilities to boost India's status as a crucial defence partner; strengthening cooperation on shared regional security threats as well as encouraging India to engage beyond the Indian Ocean region.



The measures would also include supporting India's membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG); working with India on economic reforms and an increased leadership role in the East Asia Summit (EAS) and ADMM. Assisting India, through diplomatic, military and intelligence channels, in addressing continental challenges such as border disputes with China, access to water, including the Brahmaputra and other rivers diverted by China. Endorsing India's Act East policy and its aspiration to become a leading world power, as well as highlighting its compatibility with the US, Japanese and Australian vision of a "free and open Indo-Pacific". Furthermore, the building of regional support for common US-India principles in the Indian Ocean, including unimpeded trade relations, transparent infrastructure debt practices and the peaceful resolution of territorial disputes.

What should also be mentioned is the advancement of US-India energy cooperation across all sources and technologies to diversify India's energy sources and supplies, the partnership with India on cyber and space security and maritime vigilance, the enhancement of intelligence exchange and analytical expertise with the objective of forging a robust intelligence partnership.

**Thiele:** What would you say are the US aspirations in South and South-East Asia?

**Roell:** Regarding the collaboration with India and Japan, the goal is to bankroll projects for enhancing regional connectivity between India and other countries in the region, whereby the capabilities of emerging partners in South Asia, including the Maldives, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka are expected to make contributions within the context of a free and open order.

Thus, four concrete measures are projected: The creation of a new joint initiative with South Asian partners, as modelled on the Maritime Security Initiative in South East Asia, the improvement of maritime awareness, interoperability and data sharing with the US; support for the creation of an Indian Ocean Maritime Information Centre; the establishment of a regional forum to promote common principles and standards; the promotion of a broad-based consensus in accordance with the Declaration of Principles of Accepted Maritime Conduct that would encompass a commitment to regional cooperation in accordance with common security objectives.

**Thiele:** Allow me to return to US-China relations, especially the economic and military aspects. What does the US document reveal about Chinese industrial policy?

**Roell:** The US objective is to deter China's industrial policies and improper trade practices from destabilising global markets and undermining US competitiveness. This entails taking the following actions: Adopting countermeasures to Beijing's predatory economic practices that undermine US economic competitiveness and favour the Chinese Communist Party's ambition to master the economy of the 21st century.

The formation of an international consensus as based on the understanding that China's industrial policies and unfair trade practices are damaging the system of international trade. To maintain the competitive edge of US industry over China, the US is pursuing closer cooperation with allies and like-minded countries to counter China's military and strategic capabilities. It also seeks to broaden the scope of the Committee on Foreign Investment for Chinese venture capital and other forms of investment within the US. Furthermore, on the domestic front, growth in key technologies is to be fostered.

**Thiele:** What military objectives and measures does the USA are accounted for in its calculations?

**Roell:** The aim is to deter China from using military force against the United States, its allies or partners, and to develop capabilities and approaches to interdict Chinese actions within the entire spectrum of conflict.



The following measures are designed to help achieve this: Enhancing credible US combat capability, presence and positioning in the Indo-Pacific region to preserve US interests and US security commitments. Developing and implementing a defence strategy capable of, yet not limited to, 1. persistently denying China air and naval superiority within the “first island chain” in a conflict; 2. defending nations within the first island chain, including Taiwan; 3. dominating all spaces outside the first island chain.

The above also includes supporting US allies and partners in enhancing their security posture, including military capabilities and interoperability for ensuring strategic independence and freedom from Chinese coercion.

**Thiele:** What intelligence approaches is the US adopting with regard to China?

**Roell:** The primary objective is to achieve intelligence superiority over China and to protect allies and partners from Chinese intelligence activities. To this end four measures are envisaged: 1. Providing US allies and partners with the opportunity to cooperate with the US and to jointly counter China’s clandestine activities. 2. expanding and prioritising the activities of US intelligence and security agencies in countering China’s clandestine activities in their countries. 3. enhancing defensive and offensive intelligence measures in the private and public sectors aimed at neutralising China’s growing intelligence capabilities. Broadening intelligence cooperation with other governments to enable a better understanding of China’s objectives and capabilities. 4. supporting US allies and partners in the development of high-level counterintelligence standards and cooperation in the spheres of proliferation, cyber security, industrial security, and advice on the management of classified information.

**Thiele:** Turning briefly to the Korean Peninsula. Which course of action does the USA plan to take in this case?

**Roell:** The intention here is to convince the Kim regime that the only way to ensure survival is by decommissioning its nuclear weapons. To this end, the following measures are to be applied: Exerting maximum pressure on Pyongyang by way of economic, diplomatic, military, intelligence and information means to cripple and neutralise North Korea’s weapons of mass destruction programmes. Financial flows are to be throttled, the regime must be weakened, and conditions laid down for negotiations. The ultimate goal is to reverse the nuclear and missile programmes and ultimately achieve a complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearisation of the peninsula. Negotiations will then present themselves once North Korea adopts measures to abandon its nuclear and missile programmes.

**Thiele:** The final section of the document deals with South-East Asia and the Pacific Islands. What would you say are the salient issues here?

**Roell:** The US objective is to facilitate and reinforce the central role of Southeast Asia and ASEAN in the region’s security architecture and to encourage these to speak with one voice on key issues. This should lead to a deepening of relations with Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam and Indonesia. Furthermore, the centrality of ASEAN as a core component of the free and open Indo-Pacific strategy is to be emphasised, and Japan’s proactive leadership intensified with the aim to achieve American strategic goals in Southeast Asia.

One further objective is to prevent the advance of terrorism in Southeast Asia. Thus, the nations of Southeast Asia are to be more closely involved in the coalition to destroy ISIS. Moreover, greater law enforcement, military and intelligence cooperation between Indo-Pacific states is to be fostered, and direct US counter-terrorism support made available.

**Thiele:** What other objectives is the US pursuing in Myanmar and the Pacific Islands?



**Roell:** With respect to Myanmar, the document simply states the intention to encourage and assist the country in its transition to democracy. With regard to the Pacific Islands (the US territories, the Free Associated States, the Melanesian and Polynesian states), these should maintain their ties with the United States. The relationship between the US and the Pacific Islands within this region is to be established by means of diplomatic, economic, developmental, and other informal benefits.

The document concludes by setting forth five objectives or measures, primarily of an economic nature.

**Thiele:** Dr Roell, what is your overall assessment of the US document?

**Roell:** While sections of the document have been redacted, in terms of content I find it inspiring. It did not, to be sure, issue from the pen of the “greatest US president of all time”, quite simply because the latter lacks the intellectual and strategic capacity to produce such a document.

What I have in mind here is your former positions as Chief of Staff at the NATO Defense College in Rome, and as Director of Studies at the German Armed Forces Command and Staff College in Hamburg. In such circles, the “Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific” would certainly have sparked discussion, possibly even a series of studies.

In my view, for the present it would be worthwhile analysing the extent to which Washington’s objectives and measures have so far been achieved and what implications may be drawn from such an analysis, along with recommendations for decision-makers. A comparative study of the PRC’s goals and measures in the areas of politics, economy, military, latest technologies, etc. might also be of interest – for leading think tanks, general staff courses, political foundations, universities, security companies etc. this would certainly be an interesting challenge. The Indo-Pacific will continue to be the focus of competing powers.

I should also point out, however, that there are criticisms of the USA’s Indo-Pacific strategy. For example, in his analysis “The Indo-Pacific Strategy Is a Recipe for Disaster” of 18 February 2021, Professor Lyle J. Goldstein draws attention to the changes occurring within the regional balance of power, which must ultimately lead to a new US strategy guided by realism and restraint. Goldstein is a Professor at the U.S. Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island. The article expressly states that this is his personal assessment and not the official assessment of the U.S. Navy.

**Thiele:** Before concluding, I have one final question. Will US President Joe Biden maintain his predecessor’s China policy, or will he be striking out in a new direction?

**Roell:** As I see it, the US will not undertake any major adjustments to its China and Indo-Pacific policy. Since assuming office, US President Biden made his first telephone call to China’s President Xi Jinping on 10 February 2021. During the discussion, he expressed his fundamental grievances about Beijing’s coercive and unfair economic practices, its repression in Hong Kong, human rights abuses in Xinjiang, and mounting assertive actions within the region, including Taiwan. He also advocated the concept of a “free and open Indo-Pacific”.

A further indication of the importance President Biden attaches to China and the Indo-Pacific region is that within the National Security Council (NSC), the Indo-Pacific team headed by Kurt Campbell is to be strengthened to include proven experts on Asia, thus making it the largest regional NSC directorate.

In essence, Biden will maintain a hard-line stance towards China, but unlike Donald Trump he will include US allies and partners in his policy deliberations. He also instructed the Pentagon to review the national security strategy vis-à-vis the People’s Republic of China. I eagerly await the outcome of the Global Force Posture Review.



I would also like to draw attention to statements by William Burns, designated director of the CIA, when speaking at his hearing before the US Senate on 24 February 2021. He regards his future dealings with China as a special task. Outflanking China will be crucial for US national security in the coming decades. China remains a difficult authoritarian adversary which is systematically increasing its capabilities in appropriating intellectual property, in oppressing its own people and in expanding its global influence.

On the other hand, as Burns remarked, it is in the interest of the USA to collaborate with Beijing in combating climate change and curbing the proliferation of nuclear weapons.

I believe that under CIA Director Burns intelligence cooperation with US allies and partner services will improve.

**Thiele:** Thank you very much for the interview. I look forward to the opportunity of a future discussion on the “Hotspot Indo-Pacific” from the perspective of the People’s Republic of China, the EU, the Federal Republic of Germany, NATO, India, Australia etc.

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**Note:** The presentation reflects the personal opinion of the author.

**See also:**

**Dr. Roell, Peter:** China and the European Union: All that glitters is not gold. Implications for Canada  
in: ISPSW Institut für Strategie- Politik- Sicherheits- und Wirtschaftsberatung  
Dezember 2020, Berlin  
[https://www.ispsw.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Roell\\_China-and-the-EU\\_All-that-glitters-is-not-gold\\_December-2020.pdf](https://www.ispsw.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Roell_China-and-the-EU_All-that-glitters-is-not-gold_December-2020.pdf)

**Dr. Roell, Peter:** Innen- und außenpolitische Implikationen der US-Präsidentenwahlen  
Interview Ralph D. Thiele mit Dr. Peter Roell  
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**Dr. Roell, Peter:** VR China: Politische, wirtschaftliche und militärische Auswirkungen der Corona-Krise  
Interview Ralph D. Thiele mit Dr. Peter Roell  
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## Über den Autor dieses Beitrags

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Dr Peter Roell has been President of the Institute for Strategic, Political, Security and Economic Consultancy (ISPSW) in Berlin since January 2006. His former post was as Senior Advisor for Foreign and Security Policy at the Permanent Representation of the Federal Republic of Germany to the EU in Brussels. While in Germany, he served the German Government as Director of the Asia-Pacific, Latin America and Africa (Sub-Sahara) Department and at German embassies in the Near and Middle East, and in Asia.

Dr Roell studied sinology and political sciences at the universities of Bonn, Taipei and Heidelberg. He gained his Ph.D. from the Ruprecht-Karls-University, Heidelberg. He is an Ancien of the NATO Defence College in Rome and the Federal Academy for Security Policy (BAKS) in Berlin.



## Interviewer

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Ralph D. Thiele is President of EuroDefense, Germany, Chairman Political-Military Society, Germany and Managing Director StratByrd Consulting, Germany.

In his military career, Ralph Thiele has served in major national and international security and military policy, planning and academic assignments, including on the Planning Staff of the Minister of Defence, in the Private Office of the NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe, as Chief of Staff at the NATO Defense College, as Commander of the Bundeswehr Centre for Transformation and as Director of Teaching at the German Armed Forces Command and Staff College. In his honorary and business functions he advises on Defence Innovation and Cyber issues in times of digital transformation. He has been frequently consulting, publishing and lecturing in Europe, America and Asia.

Ralph D. Thiele is also a member of the ISPSW Speaker Management Team. Further information at ISPSW website: <http://www.ispsw.com/en/speaker-management/>

