

# CSCAP REGIONAL SECURITY OUTLOOK 2023



COUNCIL FOR  
SECURITY COOPERATION  
IN THE ASIA PACIFIC

# COUNCIL FOR SECURITY COOPERATION IN THE ASIA PACIFIC

Established in 1993, the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP) is the premier Track Two organisation in the Asia Pacific region and counterpart to the Track One processes dealing with security issues, namely, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the East Asia Summit (EAS) and the ASEAN Defence Ministers Plus Forum. It provides an informal mechanism for scholars, officials and others in their private capacities to discuss political and security issues and challenges facing the region. It provides policy recommendations to various intergovernmental bodies, convenes regional and international meetings and establishes linkages with institutions and organisations in other parts of the world to exchange information, insights and experiences in the area of regional political-security cooperation.

## Front cover images

Source Top image: 16 November 2022. Bali, Indonesia. Leaders take a group photo during a tree planting event at the Taman Hutan Raya Ngurah Rai Mangrove Forest, on the sidelines of the G20 summit meeting.

Credit top image: Alex Brandon/Pool via REUTERS.

Source bottom image: 24 May 2022. Seldar, Ukraine. Evidence of Russian shelling.

Credit bottom image: AP / Andriy Andriyenko.

## Back cover image

Source: Phnom Penh Market.

Credit: Jan Huisken.

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## LETTER FROM THE CO-EDITORS

On behalf of CSCAP, we are pleased to present the CSCAP Regional Security Outlook (CRSO) 2023. Inaugurated in 2007, the CRSO volume is now in its seventeenth year.

The CRSO brings expert analysis to bear on critical security issues facing the region and points to policy-relevant alternatives for Track One (official) and Track Two (non-official) to advance multilateral regional security cooperation.

The views in the CRSO 2023 do not represent those of any Member committee or other institution and are the responsibility of the individual authors and the Editor. Charts and images in the CRSO 2023 do not necessarily reflect the views of the chapter authors.

Ron Huisken and Kathryn Brett.

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## Editor's Introduction: Open Season on the Rules-Based Order Confirms its Centrality

Ron Huisken



23 October 2022. Great Hall of the People. Xi Jinping and other leaders at the 20th CPC National Congress. Credit: Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

When Russia's President Vladimir Putin launched his 'special military operation' to invade and occupy neighbouring Ukraine on 24 February 2022, the world shuddered. In a painstakingly premeditated manner, Putin stepped over perhaps the most foundational norm of the prevailing international order – the norm prohibiting the use or threat of use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state that had been set out in seminal documents like the UN Charter and the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence. For something like two decades, the international community had sensed the gradual but relentless erosion of confidence in the principles, conventions, and processes designed to foster stability and peace. Over this period, the international political

climate has darkened steadily as issues attracting contestation outpaced areas of common interest and the space allowed for negotiation and compromise was conspicuously whittled down. This trajectory—underpinned by the spectacular surge in China's strategic weight toward parity with the US—had been widely recognised and commented on, including in the pages of this publication. The international community shuddered because, on 24 February 2022, it seemed that the end game had abruptly come into view.

The immediate fallout of the invasion of Ukraine was every bit as consequential as had been broadly foreshadowed. The fact that Putin brandished his nuclear capabilities at a very early stage, even though Ukraine is a non-nuclear weapon

state, suggests either that he was fully aware of the shock he was inflicting on the international system or that he sensed that Russia's justification for the invasion had lacked conviction and impact. The Biden administration committed itself to building and imposing the widest and most painful sanctions regime against the Russian Federation within its reach. Two longstanding European champions of neutrality—Finland and Sweden—promptly resolved to urgently seek membership of NATO. The EU abandoned its preference to look for a balanced middle ground between these groups and tilted conspicuously toward the West. In Japan, the government resolved without hesitation to support sanctions against Russia and the late former Prime Minister, Shinzo

“In a painstakingly premeditated manner, Putin stepped over perhaps the most foundational norm of the prevailing international order...”

Abe, publicly advocated an urgent review of his nation’s nuclear options – either asking the US to deploy tactical nuclear systems in Japan or launching a crash program to acquire an indigenous nuclear weapon capability.

There was also a surge of speculation on what Ukraine portended for East Asia and the Western Pacific. After the traumatic breakdown of its alliance with the USSR in 1959-60, which China’s analytic community usually characterised as a ‘never again’ experience, China and Russia issued a joint statement on 4 February 2022 that significantly upgraded the character of their renewed partnership that gradually emerged following the end of the Cold War. Although China preferred to be Russia’s silent partner as the Ukraine crises unfolded, it had, separately as well as jointly, endorsed the little known notion of indivisible security that Putin had used to support the invasion of Ukraine. Moreover, US-China tensions over Taiwan had been intensifying interactively for several years. Washington allowed more frequent and varied official-looking visits and foreshadowed a new arms package while Beijing signalled its waning tolerance of the status quo through Presidential speeches and policy statements plus allowing the PLA more scope to harass Taiwan’s

boundaries. These activities spiked alarmingly with the visit to Taiwan of US Speaker of the House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, in August 2022.

The rules-based order has emerged as a key axis of the intensifying animosity between the West and the China-Russia partnership. Twenty years ago, the latter’s position on this question tended to be characterised by guarded expressions of support, an acknowledgement that the trade regime in particular was central to their aspirations for economic development but flagging a possible interest in unspecified amendments to the wider regime at some point in the future. Only in recent times, however—essential since 2020—have these states decided to indicate more precisely where and how the rules-based order clashes with their interests and preferences.

The term ‘rules-based order’ refers to clusters of norms, laws, rules, and regulations that seek to regulate the behaviour of states when their activities intersect, particularly outside their borders. Broadly speaking, the intent behind the development of these clusters has been to encourage predictability and something resembling a level playing field where the activities of states overlap. In a word, the intent is to create and protect order.

The more obvious clusters comprising the order are, first, the broad propositions on how states should engage one another set out in the UN Charter, and the responsibilities of governments toward their citizens set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Second, each of the so-called global commons—sea/ocean, air, space, the polar regions and cyber—has its package of regulations with the degree of regulation seeming to broadly correlate with the maturity of the technology

needed to exploit that commons and the number of actors seeking access. Third, there is the arena of international commerce—trade in goods and services and flows of investment capital between states—which has by far the most highly developed regulatory regime within the order.

The key points of contention that have emerged thus far concern economic competition, governance, and international security. The most familiar is international economic competition where the focus of contestation is not so much the basic processes that underpin the flow of imports and exports but hidden subsidies to state-owned enterprises and the systematic theft of intellectual property that has soured relations between a number of states. That said, the accelerating phenomenon of ‘globalisation’ that characterised much of the global economy from the 1980s onwards resulted in degrees of economic interdependence unmatched in history but which, with the darkening political climate, came under sceptical review to see how much ‘decoupling’—or limiting the exposure of supply chains to the possible weaponization of trade—seems prudent.

“...we must change our ways...The next iteration of the rules-based order, if there is to be one, will have to be the first framed in some collective fashion.”

While disputes in and around the international trade agenda have probably attracted the most attention in recent decades, they are relatively straightforward to at least comprehend. In contrast, in respect of the other two sources of dispute—governance and international security—simply comprehending the nature and intent of the positions being advanced is more challenging.

On the theme of governance, China for many years stated that, while it valued and supported a rules-based order, it had not participated in its conception and development and therefore reserved the right to seek amendments. More recently, China has stated openly that, while it had a system of governance that was distinctive in a number of ways, it was unacceptable to in any way question its legitimacy or equivalent status to those in the west. China contends that a perfectly valid re-conceptualisation of democracy—and of related concepts such as universal human rights—supports the view that its approach to governance should be recognised as fully legitimate and effective. To assist this outcome, the CCP engaged a scholar in the mid-1990s, Wang Huning, to lead the rebuilding of a political culture appropriate to post-imperial China. Wang, who was elevated to the Politburo in 2012 and to its Standing Committee in 2017, is credited with having developed a construct seen as infused with the spirit of democracy, creativity, equality, and competition. In a similar vein, China and Russia elaborated on these themes in a landmark joint statement on 4 February 2022: “...as every nation has its own unique national features, history, culture, social system, and level of economic and social development, the universal nature of human rights should be seen through the prism of the real situation in every particular country, and human rights should be protected in

accordance with the specific situation in each country and the needs of its population”.

As for international security, the Charter of the United Nations grants the principles of “equal rights” and “self determination” to all member states. The Charter also warns against “the use or threat of use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence” of any state. The China-Russia joint statement of 4 February 2022 referenced above spoke of an aspiration to shape “a polycentric world order based on the universally recognized principles of international law, multilateralism and equal, joint, indivisible, comprehensive and sustainable security”. The last of these principles—especially the notion of indivisibility—was recognisable as the core contention made by President Putin in support of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 and was also separately and explicitly endorsed by Xi Jinping in a keynote address to the Boao Forum for Asia on 21 April 2022. The concept first appeared in an OSCE document in the 1970s but did not become a popular or standard term in official documents. The difficulties with the term include the fact it sits uncomfortably with several other core security principles set out in the Charter—sovereignty, self-determination, and independence being cases in point—and the fact that it appears to downplay the obligation on all states to play a full part in building friendly and reassuring relations with their neighbours.

Is there some way that we can reconcile these disparate approaches to organising our national affairs. We have to be honest and acknowledge that the outlook is rather bleak. In thinking about the most basic or fundamental reason why national communities have different ideas

about where to go and what needs to be fixed for that to begin to happen, a strong candidate is the attitude towards authority and power. Broadly speaking, the West came to view concentrated power as a threat to justice and decency within states and to stability and peace between states. Their response has been constitutionally decreed limits on, and the disaggregation of, the power of the state and rendering routine changes in the group elected to manage the state. The alternative view considers the threat to lie in challenges to and aspirations to share the power of the state because this is considered to put at risk the national cohesion and discipline that can be harnessed to achieve great things.

The present divide is not a case of states having broadly comparable pasts but electing to go down different paths in more recent times. China and Russia have not had the experience—spread over centuries—of steadily whittling down the authority of the head of state, of experimenting with ways for other actors to share that authority and of devising processes to inhibit any regression to the old ways. Similarly, for most democracies, the experience with absolute rule is now very dated.

Looking beyond the internal political arrangements of the key players to the arena of international security offers little solace. The dissonance that ultimately stems from the disaggregation versus concentration of authority and power is just as clear. Specifically, a critical consequence is the perceived weakness of reliable internal checks and balances on the choices available to the political leadership in Beijing and Moscow. This adds a whole further dimension to assessing the significance of whatever information is made available, a dimension inevitably filled out by external actors, and which fuels a heightened willingness



14 November 2022. Bali, Indonesia. Xi Jinping and Joe Biden meet ahead of the 2022 G20 summit. Credit: Xinhua / Li Xueren.

to seek a more reliable balance in additional and/or stronger external countervailing arrangements. This is regrettable because such external checks and balances are inescapably more blunt and assertive than internal ones. The revival of the Quad process in the Indo-Pacific, the trilateral AUKUS arrangement to deliver—amongst other things—nuclear-powered submarines to Australia and the urgent interest the Ukraine conflict generated in Sweden and Finland to secure NATO membership could be seen in this light. The shock of Russia’s weakly rationalised but painstakingly premeditated invasion of Ukraine in 2022 was exacerbated because it encountered already weakened international confidence in the conventions and processes designed to ensure stability and peace. China’s

tacit endorsement of the invasion—which both powers have linked to the notion of indivisible security—has triggered an avalanche of speculation about its possible implications for the Indo-Pacific arena.

Is there space for a constructive conversation on these matters? Finding that space is a challenge that we must approach with all the creativity and humility we can muster. The prevailing rules-based order has delivered massively across a broad front for over 70 years, not least in preventing war between the major powers. We can therefore presume that the rewards for a process of genuine engagement on constructing a workable adaptation of the current order could be immeasurable. No state should claim a monopoly on wisdom. No state should presume to be on the right side of history.

Democracies may be prone to slipping toward chaos as priorities and process are lost in a scramble to indulge too many disparate aspirations. Equally, however, no authoritarian leadership has ever dared to offer a candid account of how the order and discipline they covert was achieved and is being sustained. A first step has to be to simply lower the barriers to easier communication. All parties must project a willingness to learn and to understand. It would also be helpful to widen the band of participants in these international conversations so that we get more spontaneity and the confidence this generates that we are hearing the real story.

We already have a modest track record of edging closer together on a range of the more sensitive issues on the international economic, political,

and social agenda. Furthermore, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has noted that the prevailing order needs to be modernised to address the challenges now facing us but which could not even be imagined when the order was framed. Even if a path to reconciliation cannot be readily identified, both sides acquiring a deeper appreciation for the perspective of the other could prove to be a decisively important shock-absorber.

The final, and definitive, reality is that we must change our ways. Business as usual is not an option. All the empires of which we are aware stemmed from a powerful, unfettered leadership that achieved compelling dominance and used that status to frame the ‘orders’ we can assume were associated with them – Persian, Greek, Roman, Mongol and so on down to the United Kingdom and America in recent times. We can also surmise that all these leaders encountered the same dilemma: how to make the order suit the values and interests of the dominant power while also being sufficiently attractive

to the others to be essentially self-policing and keeping the costs of sustaining order within manageable bounds. This traditional way of an actor achieving compelling dominance and using that status to shape a new order has been overtaken by nuclear weapons. Nuclear weapons are powerful beyond purpose – they have destroyed the relationship between outcomes on the battlefield and any combination of numbers, technology, strategy, tactics, planning, judgement, effort, bravery, skill, luck, and honour. Compelling dominance has become much harder to achieve and capitalising on that dominance in a world sprinkled with nuclear weapon states harder still. The next iteration of the rules-based order, if there is to be one, will have to be the first framed in some collective fashion.

The foregoing observations suggest a cluster of straws in the wind, small indications that alongside the need for an innovative approach to refurbishing the prevailing order there may well be something of a political appetite to consider novel approaches even if the likely outcome

is a somewhat spartan order. These straws continued to swirl positively during the cluster of high-level gatherings in Southeast Asia in November 2022, notably ASEAN’s East Asia Summit and the Indonesia-chaired G20. The G20, having found a way through the Ukraine question and energised by a long and earnest bilateral between Xi and Biden, produced a full 52-paragraph leaders statement, perhaps the first consensus statement from a broad group of leaders since the invasion of Ukraine.

ASEAN must ensure that its several familiar and trusted security processes—especially the EAS and the ARF—remain alert to opportunities for these processes to assist with creating or sustaining the many protracted conversations between states that surely lie ahead.

## Ron Huisken

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26 May 2022. Solomon Islands. Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi holds arms with Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare. Credit: Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs.



## United States: Will China Let Us Have Peace?

**Charles Dunst**

Binaries are simpler than gradients. It is much easier to choose between two options – between war and peace, between friend and foe, or between cooperation and containment – than to deal with the complex gradations that surely lie in between. The reality of today’s tense US-China relationship has made this preference for simplicity all the more clear.

Since the Trump administration shifted the United States’ China policy in a tougher direction, the foreign policy communities of both the American political left and right

have coalesced around a simple conclusion: China is a challenger set on rewriting or at least altering the rules of the international order in ways more favourable to Beijing. To some, like former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, China is an “adversary” to be combated; to others, like current Secretary of State Antony Blinken, China is a “competitor” to be challenged. Still, those on both ends of this spectrum agree that China’s aggressive behaviour is something to which the United States must respond militarily, economically, and geopolitically – with resource allocation to the Indo-Pacific, controls on the export of key US technologies to China, and greater attention to the key regions in which Beijing and Washington are battling for influence, like Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands.

“Nobody is quite sure how close this great power peace is to an illusion, and how long it can last...”

Stemming from that consensus is a clear security concern: that China will foment conflict by doing something so rash, likely over Taiwan, that the United States has no choice but to respond, or, with communication channels shuttered, that some kind of military error leads to an inevitable ramping up of conflict between the two. For Americans, the greatest concern is not that the United States will start a war but that China takes such egregious action that Washington must respond.



3 August 2022. Taipei, Taiwan. US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi visits Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen at the Presidential Office. Credit: Taiwan’s Presidential Office / VAFP/Jiji.



12-13 May 2022. Washington, D.C. ASEAN and the US gather for the Special Summit. Credit: ASEAN.

## A Disordered Peace

The current reality of the Indo-Pacific is best understood as something of a disordered peace. None of the region’s great powers, the United States and China, are at war – even if the Russian invasion of Ukraine has prompted concern. Economic ties between China and the United States are strained but nonetheless remain far too important to be fully broken anytime soon. Indeed, the entire Indo-Pacific economy remains reliant on economic exchange with and between the United States and China. American and Chinese supply chains connect the Indo-Pacific and the Indo-Pacific with the world.

Yet nobody is comfortable. Just about everybody, from Washington to Beijing to Bangkok and beyond, seems to be on edge. They’re worried not so much about the Russia-Ukraine war going global, but about the intensification and escalation of US-China competition. Some third

countries are happy to wield that competition for their own benefit right now – as Vietnam has, winning tech manufacturing opportunities from firms that are relocating some operations from China due to geopolitical and domestic concerns – but they, too, are worried about the durability of this reality. Nobody is quite sure how close this great power peace is to an illusion, and how long it can last.

US Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi (D-CA), August visit to Taiwan made these concerns apparent. Senior officials from US-allied Japan and South Korea approached their American counterparts, asking why Pelosi would make such a “provocative” trip, sure to prompt retaliation from Beijing. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries and India were similarly concerned, as were New Zealand, Australia, and several of the Pacific Island nations.

“No serious player in the US policy community wants to instigate a war with China.”

The relative unity in the view that Pelosi should not have gone to the island is not because policymakers don’t care about Taiwan, but because they worry that fanning tensions over the island could set the current US-China détente up in flames.

That view is not actually so different from that of many American scholars and policymakers, including those in the White House. Several senior Biden administration officials opposed Pelosi’s visit on precisely these grounds. The trip, they said, would be needlessly provocative at a

sensitive political moment in China ahead of the now-completed 20th Party Congress. More concerningly, her trip would lead China to sever communications channels and take military action around Taiwan – actions that would together raise the risk of a mistake that could plunge the China and the United States into a spiral ending only in conflict.

In the end, China did use Pelosi's visit as reason to cancel several dialogues with the United States and carry out unprecedented military drills around Taiwan. China's exercises included live-fire drills in ocean areas surrounding Taiwan; the firing of ballistic missiles in waters near Taiwan; the firing of conventional missiles and other long-range weapons to Taiwan's east and in the Taiwan Strait; and the firing of missiles over Taiwan and into Japan's exclusive economic zone (EEZ).

These actions aimed to demonstrate China's displeasure and shift the Taiwan Strait status quo in a direction more favourable to Beijing. They do not suggest that China's President and Communist Party General Secretary Xi Jinping wants war with Taiwan and Japan or their partners, including the United States. In fact, Xi told US President Joe Biden in late July that he had no intention of going to war with the United States. China remains too reliant on the US-led financial system and on Western technology to risk losing access to both, as the country surely would amid war with the United States.

But there is no question that Xi's August actions on Taiwan risked escalation. What if one of the missiles China fired over Taiwan failed mid-flight and fell on a Taiwanese city? What if a rogue, hotshot Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) pilot – one with no real combat experience, China having not fought a proper war since 1979 in Vietnam – came

too close to and accidentally collided with an asset of Taiwan, Japan, or another US partner? What if the missiles that China fired into Japan's EEZ hit a Japanese fishing boat or even a military vessel? Domestic political pressures in Japan, Taiwan, and United States, along with the United States' stated commitment to defending Japan, would almost surely push political leaders to respond in kind.

None of these scenarios are particularly likely. But all of them are possible. And it is these possibilities that define the prevailing fear among the US national security community: not that Xi will purposely start a war over Taiwan before 2030 or so, but that he will take a more limited kinetic action – or make some mistake so egregious – that without proper communication channels, confrontation escalates to conflict and war becomes inevitable. And while there is some concern, too, about American misjudgements or provocations that prompt confrontation, the US decision-making process is far less likely to produce those than a Chinese system centred around Xi. Americans, then, are not so worried that we will start war, but that war will come to us.

## **The Domestic Becomes International**

US political developments risk changing that calculation at least somewhat. Republicans in Congress, coupled with a possible return of President Trump in 2024, could advance a China policy that is not necessarily about “competition,” as the Biden policy is, but more about “containment” vis-à-vis the US Cold War-era policy towards the Soviet Union. But containment of today's China will be far more difficult than it was with the Soviet Union, given China's status as a global centre for price-sensitive manufacturing and attractiveness to investors

from around the world. A policy of containment also risks prompting violence from Beijing.

Pompeo's call for regime change in China is one example of what this policy might look like. Another is the version of the Taiwan Policy Act (TPA) that Congressman Michael McCaul (R-TX) and 36 House Republicans introduced this past fall. Their legislation would require the US government to refer to Taiwan as a “government”, rename Taiwan's office in Washington to the “Taiwan Representative Office”, and require the top US diplomat in Taiwan to be Senate-confirmed, for starters.

These provisions all cross Beijing's “red lines.” The United States and Taiwan would, in practical terms, gain little from them. Their symbolism would almost surely prompt retaliation from China, in turn increasing the risk of accidental conflict. For those reasons, these provisions were not included in the Senate version of the TPA, which that body's Foreign Relations Committee advanced by a bipartisan vote of 17-5 in September 2022.

The Republicans' version of TPA remains unlikely to pass, but it is nonetheless indicative of the party's approach to China. Yet one could argue that the 37 Republicans who supported that legislation are some of the party's relative moderates on China, and that others – such as Trump or the ascendant Florida Governor Ron DeSantis – would take a harder line. Trump has criticised Biden's China policy as too soft, demanding reparations from Beijing for the emergence of COVID-19. DeSantis, who just claimed a sweeping re-election victory, has barred Florida state agencies from contracting with China-based companies in some cases and blasted Biden as “passive” on China.



28 July 2022. Pacific Ocean. USS Abraham Lincoln (CVN 72) in formation during RIMPAC 2022. Credit: Canadian Armed Forces Cpl. Djalma Vuong-De Ramos.

Approaching China in a more containment-focused manner, rather than continuing to carefully calibrate competition, would likely play well with American voters. Polls show that it has never been more popular to be anti-China in the United States. But what plays well at home would increase the risk of confrontation abroad.

The 2024 elections could elevate more politicians willing to advance this risky approach for domestic political gain. Depending on who holds US political power in 2025, the fear may no longer be that China makes a military mistake that requires a US response, leading to escalation, but that Chinese leaders purposely start a war, likely over Taiwan – because they believe the United States to be so hostile that it is no longer worth playing along with the niceties of competition. Once the guardrails are gone, competition could very well devolve into disaster.

## Moving Forward

At the moment, though, most US officials and scholars understand the need to calibrate our competition

with China. They know that a failure to do so, while perhaps good politics at home, would seriously worsen the security and economic outlook not only of Taiwan but of the United States as well. It is hard to imagine that the United States could stay out of a war over Taiwan, in which US lives would surely be lost – and during which US-China economic ties would rupture, having severe consequences for American, European, and other consumers used to cheap China-produced goods. The costs of kinetic confrontation are too high.

The costs would be high also for US partners in the Indo-Pacific who resent being pushed to choose between China and the United States, as a conflict between the two powers surely would. The Philippines, Thailand, and Singapore are focused on hedging between Washington and Beijing, but they host US military assets, meaning that in the case of a US-China war, they would have to decide whether to allow the United States to access these assets and thus face economic retaliation from China, or deny US access and prompt severe

action from the United States. Both choices are spectacularly bad, and there is no third option.

US recognition of these troubling realities suggests that even if Trump is re-elected and the Republicans win both houses of Congress, and they push US China policy in a more containment-like direction, the United States will not start a war with China. Neither Trump nor DeSantis is likely to launch a pre-emptive attack against mainland China or strike Chinese assets elsewhere. For all the gradations of US-China policy, from containment to competition to cooperation, Washington's approach remains fundamentally defensive. No serious player in the US policy community wants to instigate a war with China.

So, while the American security outlook is gloomy, that pessimism still stems mostly from fear of what China will do. American politicians may soon take a more aggressive approach to China than before, which may very well prompt retaliation from Beijing but the United States will not fire the literal first shot. The fear is that China will fire that shot, either intentionally or by accident, thus forcing our hand and plunging our two countries into the feared spiral of conflict. We will have peace, disordered or otherwise, only if Beijing and Washington can keep it.

## Charles Dunst

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## Japan: At a Crossroads in its Quest for Security

**Tomohiko Satake**

Japan's security environment has continued to worsen due to the resurgence of great power competition. Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its increasingly strong ties with China have made it impossible for Japan to stay out of this great power competition. In addition, the threat environment has become even more diverse and complex due to the development of advanced technologies and the emergence of new domains such as cyber, space, and electromagnetic. Against this backdrop Japan has sought to break away from its previous low profile security posture and fundamentally strengthened its defence capabilities, as well as promoting initiatives for economic security.

### Deteriorating Security Environment

The resurgence of great power competition has had a significant impact on Japan's security. Previously, Japan's major security concerns mostly came from "grey zone" threats that fall short of major conflicts. Because of the rising tensions in the Taiwan Strait and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, however, there has been growing concerns about more high-end conflicts that are associated with conventional or even nuclear threats. It has been increasingly common for analysts to observe that a "Taiwan contingency is a Japanese contingency" and that "today's Ukraine may be tomorrow's Asia".

This explains why Japan has actively supported Ukraine's resistance to Russia's invasion in line with other European partners. Japan's support to Ukraine includes the provision of non-lethal defence equipment, emergency humanitarian and financial assistance, and the acceptance of evacuees. Japan also joined international sanctions through several financial measures such as the restriction of transactions with Russia's central bank and the exclusion of selected Russian banks from SWIFT. Japan has also phased out Russian oil and coal imports.

22 January 2022. Philippine Sea. JMSDF Hyūga-class helicopter destroyer JS *Hyūga* (DDH 181) participates in training with the USN.  
Credit: US Navy photo by Intelligence Specialist 1st Class Jeremy Fallor.



“It has been increasingly common for analysts to observe that a “Taiwan contingency is a Japanese contingency” and that “today’s Ukraine may be tomorrow’s Asia.”

Japan’s support is far from surprising. When Russia invaded Crimea in 2014, Japan condemned the action and participated in G7 sanctions. But Japan’s sanctions at that time were moderate compared to those of Western countries and did not involve high economic costs for Japan. Japan also deliberately delayed the timing of sanctions to differentiate its stance from the United States and European Union. This approach was driven by a strategic calculation that it might preclude a coordinated China-Russia challenge to Japanese interests plus Japan’s interest in protecting, as far as possible, its negotiations with Russia over the Northern Territories. It was assumed that, as long as Japan maintained a good relationship with Russia, “two front wars” with Russia and China would be avoidable.

Despite such a hope, Russia has increasingly aligned with China. Since 2019, Russian and Chinese bombers have annually conducted joint flights from the Sea of Japan to the East China Sea and the Pacific Ocean. In October 2021, Chinese and Russian naval vessels circled the Japanese archipelago. In September 2022, Chinese and Russian naval vessels conducted a live fire exercise in the Sea of Japan. The frequency and scale of such joint actions have been increasing year by year. It is believed

that they are intended to yield psychological pressure and political and diplomatic effects but also to improve the interoperability of the two militaries.

Meanwhile, the gap between Japan and China in terms of military capabilities has continued to expand. For instance, China already possesses several hundred intermediate-range ballistic missiles that can hit Guam, and more than 2,000 missiles with a range as far as Japan. Yet Japan and the United States do not possess ground-based missiles that can reach China. This has created a serious “missile gap” between China and Japan.

Chinese military and coastguard ships have continued to increase their presence in the region surrounding Japan. In 2021, Chinese maritime patrol vessels’ incursions into territorial waters around the Senkaku Islands increased by 40% over the previous year. In March 2022, Chinese unmanned surveillance aircraft for the first time flew over the air defence identification zone in the East China Sea. In addition, the PLA Navy has frequently trespassed into the territorial waters around the Senkaku Islands since early 2022.

China has also been using its armed forces to step up pressure on Taiwan. During a large-scale military exercise conducted in August 2022 a Chinese ballistic missile landed in water about 80km north-northwest of Yonaguni Island. The incident attracted much attention in Japan and nearly evaporated the warm atmosphere between two countries that remained from the Japan-China summit meeting in 2018. At that time, the two leaders (Abe and Xi) agreed to move their relations from “competition to cooperation”.

Additionally, North Korea has in 2022 conducted the largest annual number of missile tests under the Kim Jong-

“Japan is stepping up to a critical turning point in its approach to security and defence.”

un regime. Moreover, North Korea’s missile threats have become more diverse over the past few years. In addition to extending their range, readiness and survivability, the missiles have become larger and more capable of being launched in rapid succession. These missiles have also adopted a variable trajectory from low to high altitude, making them more difficult to detect by radar. It is also believed that Pyongyang has developed long-range cruise missiles, hypersonic glide missiles, and tactical nuclear weapons.

In addition to these traditional security concerns, Japan has faced emerging threats in new domains such as cyber, space, and electromagnetic waves. After a massive cyber-attack against a Japanese defence-related company in 2021, approximately 20,000 files, including security-related files, are believed to have leaked to outside parties. Japan also faces urgent challenges in dealing with disinformation and deception operations using SNS and other means, potential attacks on nuclear power plants and other critical infrastructure, and economic coercion or “weaponization of interdependence” by countries on which Japan is heavily dependent for critical commodities and energy resources.

Given the deteriorating security environment, Japan’s political stance in the great power competition has become clearer than before. Japan can no longer enjoy the luxury



24 May 2022. Tokyo, Japan. The Quad Leaders' Meeting. Credit: Prime Minister's Office of Japan.

of keeping its distance from this competition, and has in fact, become increasingly involved as an important player. Japan's unconditional support to Ukraine, as well as its active diplomacy in the G7 and NATO, has clearly demonstrated its determination to support the Western community. So long as the existing order continues to be challenged by revisionist powers, Japan is likely to sustain this posture.

## Fundamental Reinforcement of Defence Capabilities

With such a strong sense of crisis, Japan is moving forward rapidly with efforts to “fundamentally reinforce” its defence capabilities. According to Japan's Ministry of Defense, the “fundamental reinforcement” of defence capability includes seven elements: (1) standoff defence capability, (2) comprehensive missile air defence capability, (3) unmanned asset defence capability, (4) cross-

domain capability, (5) command and control and intelligence-related functions, (6) mobile deployment capability, and (7) sustainability and resilience. To strengthen these capabilities, the Ministry of Defense estimates that approximately 48 trillion yen (about 342 billion US dollars) will be required over the next five years.

Regarding the enhancement of standoff defence capabilities, the SDF has long sought to build a defence capability that would not pose a threat to other countries by intentionally shortening the range of its fighter jets, etc. Yet Japan has reconsidered such a policy in the face of China's anti-access and area-denial (A2/AD) strategy, as well as the expanding “missile gap” between Japan and China. The SDF has already decided to extend the range of the Type 12 surface-to-ship guided missile deployed in the Nansei Islands and acquire JSM air-to-ship

missiles and JASSM air-to-surface missiles for use on fighter aircraft. It has also reportedly considered introducing submarine-launched cruise missiles.

In addition, lessons learned from the war in Ukraine have led to the recognition of the need to strengthen the ability to sustain war over the long term. In particular, it has been urgent to secure ammunition and fuel in the Southwest Islands, which will be the base of operations for the SDF and US forces in the event of a contingency, expand explosives depots, increase equipment production, and enhance warfighting capability through transportation of troops and supplies. To prepare for missile attacks in the event of a contingency, the strengthening of base compatibility and the decentralised deployment of military assets are also being discussed.

Japan has also sought to strengthen defence capabilities by using advanced technologies such as AI, unmanned aerial vehicles, and quantum technology. In addition to research into the development of stand-off electronic warfare aircraft, UUV technology, and high-speed glide bombs for island defence, Japan's Defense Equipment Agency is also working with the private sector to strengthen the development of technologies that could be "game changers" in the future. Those technologies may potentially include directed energy weapons or quantum positioning systems. The introduction of attack-type unmanned aerial vehicles is reportedly also being considered.

Japan has also enhanced the SDF's interoperability with allies' and friends' militaries to strengthen deterrence. In particular, Japan has promoted institutional, tactical, and strategic integration with the United States with particular emphasis on the integration of US forces and the Self-Defense Forces in new domains. As part of this effort, for example, the Ground Self-Defense Force and the US Army's Multi-Domain Task Force conducted joint training in the South-west Islands in August of this year. The US and Japan have also strengthened cooperation in the economic and security areas through the announcement of the "US-Japan Competitiveness and Resilience Partnership" and the holding of the economic version of 2 plus 2 talks in April and July of this year.

Further, Japan has strengthened its partnerships with countries other than the US. In January 2021, Japan and Australia agreed a Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA). The SDF has begun to protect Australian military assets since 2021. In November 2022, moreover, Japan and Australia announced a new Declaration of Security Cooperation,

which made it clear that Japan and Australia would consult and consider joint actions in the event of regional contingencies. Negotiation over an RAA with the United Kingdom have also been ongoing. With India, Japan agreed to promote defence equipment and technology cooperation, as well as conducting a first fighter jet training exercise. Such cooperation with India may eventually pave the way for military cooperation in the Quad, which has so far focused on non-traditional or non-military cooperation.

Finally, Japan has stepped up its defence engagement with Indo-Pacific countries under the banner of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific". The Indo-Pacific Deployment—a long-term deployment mission conducted by the Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF) that began in 2017—has returned to normal operations after a temporary reduction in size and duration due to the spread of COVID-19. In 2022, the total number of deployed personnel amounted to 980 air and maritime force units, the largest number ever. In addition to Australia and India, SDF units have been deployed mainly to Pacific Island countries such as Solomon Islands, Tonga, and Papua New Guinea, strengthening the SDF's presence in the region.

## Economic Security

Another important measure to cope with diversified threats is the promotion of economic security. Since around 2019, the Japanese government has been rapidly developing new organisations, posts, and laws related to economic security. In May 2022, the Law for the Promotion of Economic Security was passed by the Diet. The new Law aims at strengthening supply chain resilience, the protection of critical infrastructures, support for the development of emerging technologies, and the closed-door filing of patent applications. These four elements

are expected to be incorporated as demand elements in the National Security Strategy to be released later this year.

Key concepts in Japan's economic security policy are "strategic autonomy" and "strategic indispensability". The former concept means strengthening the foundations essential for the maintenance of national life and socioeconomic activities in extreme circumstances in order to prevent excessive dependence on other countries. The latter concept, on the contrary, refers to Japan's strategic intent to develop and produce internationally indispensable technologies and capabilities and to create situations where other countries are forced to depend on Japan. To achieve these goals, Japan has sought to invest resources in internationally competitive fields, such as semiconductor materials or machine technologies.

For a long time since the end of the World War II, Japan has prioritised economic activities over security under the so-called "Yoshida Doctrine". Although security has never been neglected it has been considered prudent for Japan to take a low profile, especially in the area of military security, so long as Japan can be under the security umbrella of the United States. Now, however, the economy has become subordinate to security, and the Kishida administration is working to increase defence spending under the banner of "fundamentally reinforcing" defence capabilities. Apparently, the long era of peace, a low-profile defence posture and heavy reliance on the US, has come to an end, and Japan is stepping up to a critical turning point in its approach to security and defence.

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## European Union: The War in Ukraine and the Growing North-South Divide

**Alice Ekman**

The ongoing Russia-Ukraine war is of course the very top concern of the European Union and EU member states, who have adopted several large-scale packages of energy and technological sanctions against Russia since the beginning of its full-scale military invasion of Ukraine on 24th February 2022. In spite of these sanctions, the delivery of European weapons to Ukrainian military personnel, the numerous calls by EU and member states representatives on Russia to immediately stop its military aggression against Ukraine,

and the significant loss of lives (about 40,000 civilians have been killed in Ukraine, and more than 100,000 Russian soldiers have been killed or injured in the war, according to US estimates in November 2022) Moscow did not stop its invasion. In fact, Russia coupled it with other moves which led to further escalation of the conflict. These moves included the “partial mobilisation” of 300,000 reservists in September, several threats to use weapons of mass destruction (including the use of nuclear weapons), as well as the organisation in late September 2022 of illegal “referenda” in the parts of Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhia regions that were occupied, at least in part, by Russia at that time. The latter were strongly condemned by a declaration of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy on behalf of the EU.

“The war in Ukraine has not led to the suspension of the EU’s policy to diversify its ties in Asia...”

### **Conflict theatres intertwined: from Europe to the Indo-Pacific**

The war in Ukraine has not led to the suspension of the EU’s policy to diversify its ties in Asia, from Southeast Asia to Central Asia—in part through the development of transport, digital and energy connectivity projects under the “Global Gateway”—the EU plan launched in 2021 aims to mobilise up to €300 billion in investments by 2027. On the contrary, and independently of the ongoing



26 July 2022. Australia. 24th annual Indo-Pacific Chiefs of Defence Conference. Credit: NATO / Flickr.

“A deeper North-South divide is growing around the war in Ukraine.”

connectivity cooperation dynamics, the war led to renewed cooperation and solidarity with several Indo-Pacific partners, such as Japan or Australia, who were swift to condemn Russia’s aggression, adopt sanctions and provide military and/or humanitarian aid. Many Indo-Pacific partners see this solidarity as important given the urgency of the situation in Europe and the brazen challenge to democratic governance, but also as an instinctive move to uphold the Charter of the United Nations and the associated wider rules-based order.

Many states are inclined to see conflict theatres in Europe and the Indo-Pacific regions as increasingly intertwined, with countries located far from Ukraine ready to take clear position on the conflict. At the same time, divergences among the Indo-Pacific group emerged, with countries such as India adopting a distinctive position, reluctant to hold Moscow responsible for the invasion and to then, necessarily, reconsider its significant security and energy cooperation with Russia.

Most of all, the European Union and most EU member states expected clarification of China’s position on the issue. If the hope, formulated in March 2022 by the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs Josep Borrell, that China could act as a “mediator” in the crisis, was quickly dismissed, expectations that Beijing would at least initiate a condemnation of some of Russia’s actions remained in the air. But the EU-China Summit of 1st April 2022, described by Borrell

as a “dialogue of the deaf”, dispelled such expectations, as did other exchanges with China at the EU and member states levels that took place in the following months. The hope and expectation that the weight of EU-China trade (China became the EU’s biggest trading partner in 2021) and the shadow of the secondary sanctions would encourage Beijing to at least distance itself somewhat from Russia (officially labelled as China’s “best friend”) has so far proved to be largely misplaced. An important exception is that China joined the EU and the US in confirming their opposition to the use of WMD under any circumstances.

### China-Russia: a resistant relationship

The relationship between China and Russia remains closely monitored in Europe. Long seen as a simple “marriage of convenience”, the rapprochement between the two countries has in fact been consolidated by much more than pragmatic energy cooperation, but also by a shared resentment against the US, NATO and as the ‘West’ in general terms. The signing on 4 February 2022, on the margins of the Winter Olympics opening ceremony, of the *Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development* showed that the bilateral rapprochement has been planned by the two governments in a strategic and detailed manner. Although China and Russia are not allies by treaty, the joint statement unmistakably formalised a China-Russia security partnership. The document reaffirmed their strong mutual support for their core interests, state sovereignty and territorial integrity and opposition to interference in their internal affairs. Of particular importance to China was that, in a unilateral commitment within the Joint Statement, Russia reaffirmed its

support for the One-China principle, that Taiwan was an inalienable part of China and its opposition to any forms of independence for Taiwan. Most of all, the length and structure of the document—issued only a few weeks before the start of the war in Ukraine—clearly indicated that the bilateral relationship has consolidated rapidly in recent years and has been based on a shared post-Western view of the world order. The war in Ukraine has so far not reset the relationship.

Of course, significant rational limits exist to the Sino-Russian partnership since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, including: many Chinese companies risk very damaging secondary sanctions if they continue to conduct business with Russia, China’s diplomatic relations with key trade partners, including the EU, risk further deterioration due to strong divergences on the Ukraine issue, and China is becoming more aware of the limits of the Russian military and may reconsider the nature of its military partnership with Russia in the future. The stresses associated with the wilful attack on Ukraine have exposed significant imbalances between the two countries, and in particular have reinforced Russia’s economic dependency on China, that are likely to complicate their future collaboration. These imbalances can be seen on the economic front (China is the second largest economy in the world, Russia ranks 11), but also, increasingly, across the diplomatic, technological, and military fields.

At the same time, the current global divide over sanctions towards Russia may lead to the consolidation of normative rapprochement between China, Russia, and members of their ‘circle of friends’: norms for financial and payment systems, norms for an internet governance regime, and norms regulating blockchain and digital currency and other tools that

may facilitate the circumvention of sanctions. And the Chinese authorities are likely to continue to seek more autonomy from the West regarding technological hardware and software, in line with the objectives set out in China's 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025) of self-reliance and promotion of domestic consumption ('dual-circulation').

All things considered, the China-Russia rapprochement is likely, in broad terms, to continue to consolidate in the coming years, as it is driven by a shared strong resentment against the West as well as strong geopolitical ambitions to restructure global governance and norms towards a post-Western order. The coalition-building efforts on both sides—'Western-led' or 'China-Russia led'—are diametrically opposed because they wish to gather countries around radically different types of political systems, development models, and ideals.

## Different hierarchies of priority

The recent multilateral gatherings – the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Summit in September 2022 in Uzbekistan, and the G20 and APEC Summits in Indonesia and Thailand respectively in November 2022 – have not only underlined diverging views on the war in Ukraine, but also diverging hierarchies of priorities for the other prominent issues on the international agenda. Some countries, including all EU member states, consider that war in Ukraine should be and remain at the top of the bilateral and multilateral agendas, whereas others, including China and several Southeast Asian countries, consider that it should not monopolise regional and international discussions. This generates a new form of multilateral cacophony leading to tensions from the very early stage of preparations for summits and other major



15 September 2022. Members of the Royal Company of Archers guard the coffin of Queen Elizabeth II, as members of the public pass the coffin inside Westminster Hall. Credit: Yui Mok / POOL / AFP.

international meetings—tensions on the shaping of the agenda and the participants' list, until the conclusion of summits—and an inability to issue joint and meaningful statements. More recently, as the consequences of the war in Ukraine and related sanctions are being felt globally and concerns on energy prices and food security intensify, new sets of divergences are emerging between countries. For example, some countries—mainly from emerging/developing world—argue in substance that it is not their war and that the West is making the rest pay the consequences of their war and sanctions. A deeper North-South divide is growing around the war in Ukraine but also around many other issues and crisis, including Hong Kong, Xinjiang (polarisation of votes at the UN Human Rights Council) and the pandemic crisis. The EU, EU member states and other countries perceived as 'Western' have faced criticisms around the perceived lack of solidarity in the management

of the pandemic globally and the implementation of the COVAX facility. From the perspective of the EU, which is collectively the biggest donor for international aid in the world, providing over 50 billion Euros a year to help overcome poverty and advance global development, and which contributed 500 million Euros to the COVAX facility, these criticisms are seen as unfair and part of a broader "battle of narratives" in which various countries, including Russia and China, are eager in any situation to encourage the emergence of a negative and accusative image of the West using distorted fact, fake news and disinformation campaigns. In this context, the EU is stepping up its engagement and ability to respond to foreign information manipulation and interference.

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## Canada: Navigating the US-Canada-China Triangular Relationship

**Charles Labrecque**

Canada's Asia security outlook has evolved over the past year. After the release of the "two Michaels" in September 2021 following the US Department of Justice suspending its charges and withdrawing its extradition request against Huawei CFO Meng Wanzhou, Canada officially embarked on a path to redefine its approach to engagement with China and the broader Asian region. The result of this reflection process has been released on November 27, in the form of Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy, which will guide Ottawa's engagement in the region for years to come.

Two main concerns prevailed in Canada's deliberation over its Indo-Pacific Strategy, both standing at the centre of how it analyses the region, namely: (1) China's assertive attitude and increasingly revisionist agenda,

and (2) Canada's relation with the US. For Canada, navigating its triangular relationship with Beijing and Washington is at the core of its strategic outlook of the Indo-Pacific region. Additionally, Beijing's military activities in the South China Sea and the threat it poses to Taiwan, combined with North Korea's nuclear ambitions and intercontinental ballistic missile program, consist of the other main traditional security threats in the Indo-Pacific, with both bearing direct potential consequences for Canada and influencing its thinking on regional security.

As a trading nation, Canada aims at advancing its economic interests in the Indo-Pacific region as its main foreign policy goal. As such, it wishes to contribute to regional stability, which includes fostering sustainable and resilient supply chains and limiting the impact of the US-China rivalry. For Canada, the crux of the matter in the Indo Pacific consists of how the country should best go about simultaneously achieving these goals.

With the bipartisan consensus that now exists in Washington regarding the existential threat that China poses to US' interests and pre-eminence, Canada's options

"With the bipartisan consensus ... in Washington regarding the existential threat that China poses to US' interests and pre-eminence, Canada's options to engage with China are limited."

to engage with China are limited. Despite Washington's pledge to "work with China on urgent global issues", both the US and China have different perspectives on several key issues and the potential for conflict between both powers is real. Canada's options to interact with China and the broader Asian region are also hindered by its own domestic political situation. Recent polls have shown that Canadians recognise the importance of Asia and the need for the government to engage with the region on a variety of issues ranging from public health and climate change to cybersecurity, while also unequivocally showing Canadians' negative feelings vis-à-vis China and its influence on world affairs. Recent results also revealed that only 35% of Canadians now believe China's growing power to be more of an opportunity than a threat, down from 68% in 2018.

For decades, Canada has based its policy of engagement with China on the assumption that, over time, the regime would evolve toward economic liberalism and democracy, which would lead to a greater respect for civil rights. While doing so, the belief was that Canada would benefit from trading with



9 September 2022. Guam to South China Sea. Exercise Noble Raven. Credit: JMSDF.

“... for Canada, despite having an interest in engaging with China, navigating its triangular relationship with Beijing and Washington is at the core of its strategic interests...”

the world’s most populous market, notably by exporting products and services, receiving investments, stimulating tourism, and attracting Chinese students. But following the nomination of Xi Jinping as President in 2013, it rapidly became clear that the changes the West were hoping to see unfold in China would not occur and that under Xi’s leadership the regime was instead to become increasingly authoritarian and nationalistic.

Early in the 2000s signs were pointing at how Canada’s policy toward the Asia Pacific region had already run its course. Successive governments in Ottawa had not been able to find a balance between the promotion of Canada’s economic interests and its values, nor did it succeed at advancing any of its two interests. The growth of Canada’s exports to China and the region had stalled while the promotion of human rights was put on the back burner. Canada was also still not recognised as a serious player in the region, with allies complaining that “Canadians come and go”. Canada’s Asian partners have repeatedly emphasised that for Canada to strengthen its commercial and economic position in the region it must become much more engaged, including being further involved in regional institutions and contributing to regional security.

Furthermore, with the arbitrary arrest of two of its citizens in Beijing in December 2018 and the economic sanctions subsequently imposed by China on Canada’s staple export products such as canola, beef, and pork, came the revelation that the “special” relation Ottawa believed to have had with Beijing was no more.

In the minds of policymakers in Ottawa, China was at one time representing Canada’s best hope in diversifying its global trade and, on the same token, reducing its reliance on the US market and its vulnerability to the damaging unilateral economic actions Washington sometime takes against Canadian exports to protect its own industries. But this is clearly not the case anymore, with Industry minister Francois-Philippe Champagne recently talking about “decoupling” from China and Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland highlighting the “geopolitical risks of doing business with [China]”, it is definitely no longer “business as usual” between Canada and China.

Trade, even with China, will remain an important part of Canada’s strategic considerations in the Indo-Pacific region, and while there is a consensus about Canada’s need to diversify its exports and partnerships in Asia and to move away from “doing more, more, more” with China, Ottawa needs a strategy so it can do so successfully. Especially as Washington’s confrontational posture toward Beijing puts its allies in a difficult position, an Indo-Pacific strategy will clarify its intention to its allies. Many experts have called for Canada to take on an independent foreign policy from the US on Asia and especially China, but with Washington having in recent years taken a harder stance towards China and now even seemingly seeking to contain it, at least on the technology side, this certainly puts US allies in a difficult position. And despite saying otherwise, Washington is now arguably increasingly trying to force its allies to pick a side. How to carry on working with China while strengthening its relations with the US is at the very centre of Canada’s debate about its Indo-Pacific strategy and two broad visions are being pondered on.



4 August 2022. Phnom Penh, Cambodia. ASEAN-Canada Ministerial Meeting. Credit: ASEAN.

The first vision argues that Canada should pursue a balancing strategy against China, mainly by standing behind the US' rhetoric and policy toward China and the Indo-Pacific region. Canada's national interest, it is argued, should align with that of the US, its main market and security provider. This would help Canada ensure the continuity of its trade with the US and minimise the risks of an America First policy. It is also argued for Canada to do more militarily in the region, which would also ameliorate the prospect of its economic diversification in Asia. Increased trade and investment in the region, it is believed, can only be achieved if it is accompanied by an increased military presence for Canada in order to be taken seriously in the region.

In this conception, China is seen as a revisionist power and the most important geopolitical risk that Canada needs to address. To illustrate this, commentators often highlight that Canada is located no further from Beijing than Australia is to the Chinese capital, emphasising the need for Canada to take the region more seriously and to beef up its defence spending to increase the size of its military forces and modernise its military equipment.

In recent years, Canada has deployed some efforts to increase its visibility and participation in the region's security architecture. For example, more frequent ministerial visits and participation in various regional forums have occurred along with increased participation in military exercises and other relevant multilateral security efforts in the region. This first vision argues however that this is not enough for Canada to be seen as a credible player and that Canada needs to develop a more robust military presence in the region. For this to happen, Canada should undertake

further concrete actions such as joining the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and even AUKUS, the trilateral security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Taking such a stand would clearly show Canada's commitment to the stability of the region as well as to its integration in new strategic institutions comprised of like-minded partners seeking to cooperate on matters such as protecting supply chains and cooperating on cyber-defence and critical technologies. This would also allow Canada to take part in efforts perceived as seeking to stand up to China's growing power. By not joining AUKUS, it is also argued, Canada risks being consigned to a lesser role among the Five Eyes intelligence-sharing alliance that also includes the US, the UK, Australia, and New Zealand.

The second vision instead assumes that Canada should play a more neutral role in the Indo-Pacific region, one that would not espouse the US rationale and strategies on China. Proponents of this second approach defend that Ottawa should, just as it did throughout history, avoid the kind of geostrategic alignment that seems to be currently desired in Washington. Canada holds a certain interest in reinforcing its alliance with the US, not exclusively for the sake of commercial relations but also as a mean to work toward preserving the rules-based international order.

Proponents of that vision do not see a contradiction or even a challenge for Canada to seek an independent approach towards both the US and China and instead argue that Canada can manage both an effective and pragmatic relationship with China while simultaneously contributing to US security goals.

Such proponents also highlight that rising tensions between Beijing and other capitals in the region have failed to produce a strong anti-China coalition, with most countries refusing to either pick a side or continuing to simultaneously engage with Beijing and Washington on different matters. Several surveys have shown that countries in Asia – and especially in Southeast Asia, are far more concerned about their economic recovery and non-traditional security threats than about the potential military conflicts in the region.

If Canada wishes to play an impactful role in the Indo-Pacific regional security architecture, one that would be in line with its interests, this second approach then argues that Ottawa should focus on ASEAN and emulate a similar approach to the one taken by France or Germany, which seeks to deal with China simultaneously as a partner for cooperation, an economic competitor, and a systemic rival, but without seeking containment or economic decoupling strategies.

Finally, whether the adoption by the Canadian government of the "Indo-Pacific" terminology over the "Asia Pacific" signals a fundamental shift regarding how Canada approaches the Asian region and whether Ottawa seeks to align its approach to the US' and work alongside Washington to contain China remains to be seen. But for Canada, despite having an interest in engaging with China, navigating its triangular relationship with Beijing and Washington is at the core of its strategic interests and will remain a key factor driving its outlook on the Indo-Pacific region.

## **Charles Labrecque**

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## Russia: Still Searching for Security Without the USSR

Alexey Kupriyanov

The life of Russian scholars and their ideas about the world around them and about the problems they deal with have changed dramatically since 24 February 2022. Security issues, which until then had been abstract, suddenly entered our lives, and instead of thinking about how a military conflict in Ukraine could develop in theory, we are watching it in reality with the battles demonstrating the weaknesses and strengths of Russian and Western weapons and personnel. But it seems that for us, the inhabitants of Russia, this rift has become, paradoxically, less sharp than for our colleagues in the West. If for them this is the end of the familiar world then for us it is yet another stage of a protracted security problem that dates back to the late

1980s, albeit a stage that is more overt and leading to more serious changes.

### NATO Problem

The assertion that the anxiety of Russian society and the expert community as a whole is caused to a large extent by NATO expansion is often considered by Western experts, journalists and politicians as simply a justification for Russia's behaviour. From the Russian point of view, however, it explains much of Russia's foreign policy. After the end of the Cold War the USSR collapsed, and the new states formed from its fragments ceased to be hostile to the West. Moreover, Russia declared its desire to become a part of this West, entering into all its structures. In the

new Russian leadership, the pro-Western group occupied an important place and even dominated, especially after Yeltsin's victory in the civil conflict in 1993. Although later, after the West criticised Russian actions in

“If for [the West] Ukraine is the end of the familiar world, then for [Russians] it is yet another stage of a protracted security problem that dates back to the late 1980s”



Kremlin Pool/Mikhail Metzke (Reuters)

9 May 2022. Moscow, Russia. Vladimir Putin watches a military parade on Victory Day Credit: Sputnik / Mikhail Metzke.



25 October 2022. Berlin. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy addresses a conference on Ukraine reconstruction. Credit: John MacDougall / AFP.

Chechnya and the opposite opinion began to gain strength, the position of the pro-Western faction was still strong.

Russian strategic culture, like any other, is largely irrational. We tend to seek answers to current questions in history and we are sensitive to any threats from the West because it was Europe that produced both Napoleon and Hitler. That is why Russian society, much less pro-Western than the Russian elites, could not help but raise the issue of NATO. This organisation was created as a defensive alliance against the USSR. The Soviet Union is gone but far from being dissolved and transformed, NATO continues to actively expand. Whom is NATO directed against? Why does it not only remain a military alliance but also constantly accepts new members approaching the borders of Russia?

A popular story in Russia is that Western leaders promised Gorbachev that NATO would not expand. Western scholars for a long time dismissed this as a fairy tale but later it turned out that although they did not promise anything concrete, Western leaders did encourage

Gorbachev to accept their assurances on the non-expansion of NATO. Such a play on words may justify Western politicians in their own eyes but for Russians it is evidence that the words of Western leaders cannot be trusted.

The Ukrainian crisis reinforced this impression even more. For Russia, this is a delayed consequence of the collapse of the USSR when territories with significant Russian-speaking populations turned out to be part of Ukraine. After the start of direct conflict in 2014, the stubborn refusal of Western leaders to force their Ukrainian counterparts to fulfill their promises and accept Russian proposals to defuse the situation in Europe finally convinced Russians of the hypocrisy of the West and provoked the current escalation. For the West, this came as a shock. For Russians it was a natural, albeit painful, continuation of processes that had begun long ago. It is obvious that the west is now closed to Russia, and Russia has no choice but to look for its future in the East.

## Eastern Frontier

For Russian society, given the orientation of its strategic culture to the West, this will be a traumatic experience. Russia's previous attempt at expansion in this direction, which on the whole coincided with the expansion of other European powers, resulted in a painful defeat. An attempt to strengthen their economic position and, as some particularly ambitious publicists dreamed of, to create a full-fledged empire in the East based on the colonisation of northeastern China (the so-called Yellow Russia) and the establishment of a protectorate over Korea were not backed up by sufficient forces and infrastructure, and ultimately ended in defeat in the Russo-Japanese War.

The issue of the security of the eastern borders was the most worrying for the Russian leadership over the following decades. The infrastructure was still inadequate and the population small, so the government experimented by relying heavily on the militia. Throughout the entire interwar period, the Far Eastern border was one of the most turbulent, including regular clashes with Chinese and Japanese troops. One of the most combat-ready armies of the Soviet Union, the Special Far Eastern Army, under the command of the talented Vasily Blucher, attracted the attention of the Japanese in two important battles—the Battles of Lake Khasan (1938) and Khalkhin Gol (1939)—convincing them that the Soviet Union was strong enough to repulse any attack. This encouraged the Japanese to choose a southerly and easterly direction of expansion, going to war with European powers and the United States, and a tense peace continued along this border until 1945.

Although the Russians took revenge in 1945 for their defeat in the Russo-Japanese War they limited themselves to minimal territorial



“If Russia achieves a convincing victory and manages to finlandize Ukraine, this will be the last war in Europe for many years”

acquisitions, handing over Port Arthur to China and not occupying Hokkaido. The ensuing bloody war in Korea, which led to a strategic stalemate, together with the death of Stalin meant a loss of interest in the Far East theatre. Subsequent Soviet leaders talked a lot about the development of the Far East, but did little, focusing on supporting friendly regimes with money, equipment, and weapons without trying to radically change the balance of power in the region.

In July 1986, when Perestroika had already begun in Russia, Mikhail Gorbachev visited Vladivostok. There he delivered a keynote speech that outlined the USSR's new policy for the Asia-Pacific. It was time to end the Sino-Soviet standoff, develop relations with the United States to create a comprehensive international security system, reduce fleets in the Pacific, resume negotiations on a zone of peace in the Indian Ocean, and build confidence between all players in the region. This plan did not work, primarily because the USSR soon collapsed and Gorbachev's political career collapsed with it.

In post-Soviet times, Pacific Russia has become a valuable but remote province for the metropolis which must be constantly supplied from the budget. On the one hand, it was obvious that the Far East was necessary for Russia; on the other

hand, its development required large investments. The population of the Far East was getting smaller and the economy became closely connected with China, Korea, and Japan. Russia's policy in the Indo-Pacific was extremely passive and largely comprised supporting ASEAN. But the current conflict may change everything.

## **Indo-Pacific and Russia: New Relations**

It is not yet clear how the current conflict will end. If Russia achieves a convincing victory and manages to finlandize Ukraine this will be the last war in Europe for many years; if not, then it will be an armistice for 20 years. Sooner or later the issue will be resolved. Former Soviet territories can still become the subject of bargaining and even change loyalty and owners, but in general, a hostile peace will be established on the western border of Russia. The new cordon sanitaire will cut it off from Western markets, investments, and technologies. In the eyes of Russian society, Russia's western border will be under constant threat of invasion from NATO. This means that significant efforts will be made to ensure the stability of the border and Russia will not hesitate to use nuclear weapons to stop possible full-scale invasion by NATO and its allies. Both the elites and the population will approve of this posture.

In this situation, Russia will again have to consider shifting the main focus of its activities to the East. This is a difficult task for both objective and subjective reasons. The main population of Russia and its key infrastructure has historically been and is located to the west of the Urals, where the most fertile territories and the main production centres are located. In addition, over the past few decades there has been a gradual outflow of population from the

northern and eastern regions, and it will not be easy to reverse this trend. Another important problem is the deep Eurocentricity of the Russian political, economic, and military elites who will have to completely change their view. But sooner or later this will happen and then Russia will have to solve a number of important tasks.

The first task is the security of shipping on which the survival of the Russian economy will depend. The high freight cost due to Western sanctions and the detention of Russian ships in European seas make Russia think about recreating the merchant marine, creating insurance and reinsurance companies to reduce the freight cost for foreign ships, and the construction of a powerful fleet in the Far East in order to protect its merchant marine. The longer the conflict lasts and the more actively the European elites use Churchillian rhetoric towards Russia, proclaiming the impossibility of a compromise and painting it as an absolute evil, the more likely this scenario becomes, since Russia will simply have no other choice. Most likely, a significant strengthening of the Russian Pacific Fleet will follow with an emphasis on frigates capable of operating throughout the Indo-Pacific to protect Russian trade routes.

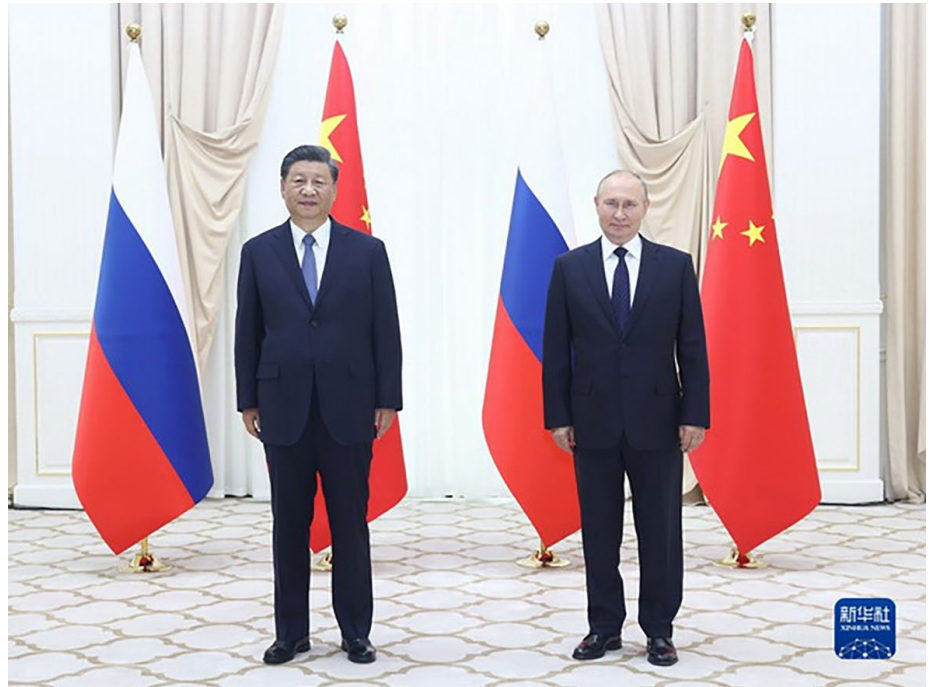
The second task is finding Russia's place in this new world and building new relations with the countries of the East. With some, notably Japan, Russia will have problems from the outset. From the Russian point of view Japan is an extremely unfriendly state and also claims the southern part of the Kuril Islands. The situation is complicated by the fact that Russia's military and politicians do not consider Japan a fully sovereign country since it is connected with the United States by a binding treaty, and there are military bases on its territory. As a result, the territorial issue is at an impasse:

Russia cannot and does not want to give the territories to Japan as long as Tokyo is a vassal of the United States, since it is obvious that Japan cannot guarantee their non-use for military purposes.

Since Russian elites are now looking at the situation in the Indo-Pacific through the prism of events taking place in Ukraine, those who help Ukraine or impose sanctions on Russia are included in the list of unfriendly countries. Of the countries and territories of the Indo-Pacific, this list includes the USA, South Korea, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, Micronesia, Singapore, and Taiwan. Russia considers the other Indo-Pacific countries as a priori friendly since trade with them helps its economy survive under the sanctions. China and India are seen as key partners for Russia in the region.

In this imaginable new world, it becomes critical for Russia that NATO not expand into the Pacific. Russia regards “cold war on the western border, peace in the east” as a working scheme. Developments such as the Quad and AUKUS that carry the risk of a split of the region along military lines or which attempts to isolate members of the community of Indo-Pacific states are perceived negatively. Russia legitimately fears that it will quickly find itself among the “revisionists who must be restrained” and seeks to avoid this. It takes a similar position on the possible isolation of China and any other country that Russia considers friendly.

In Russia’s view the Indo-Pacific is ASEAN-centric. Moscow has established good relations with almost all ASEAN countries and Russia views ASEAN as an independent organisation, which is interested in developing economic cooperation between the participating countries and does not try to isolate China and



15 September 2022. Samarkand, Uzbekistan. President Xi Jinping held a bilateral meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Summit. Credit: Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Russia. ASEAN is the pivot around which the Indo-Pacific revolves and where freedom of navigation and trade is observed; this is the ideal of Russia.

In summary, Russia is on the cusp of tying its future to success in and with the Indo-Pacific community. Russia will have to show considerable skill in establishing economic, political, and military interaction with countries, many of which are hostile to each other. But its skilful performance in the South China Sea, where Russia manages to maintain good relations with all parties to the territorial dispute, gives hope that it will succeed.

### Alexey Kupriyanov

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## India: Looking to Help Frame a New Global Balance

### Constantino Xavier

For states used to the comfort of strict alliances and alignments, today's rapidly transforming world order represents a source of concern and often also existential threat. The past of reassuring predictability has been replaced with the constant uncertainty of fluidity. This is something that India sees as a challenge, but also as an opportunity to hone its role as a bridging power and to help the world find a new balance.

The global pandemic and Russia-Ukraine war have had a dual structural impact that accelerated the systemic transition slowly evolving since the 2008 financial

crisis. At home, countries are witnessing the erosion of institutional resilience and deepening socio-economic inequalities as seen in Sri Lanka's financial collapse and in Iran's political unrest. And abroad, countries have reduced their investment in cooperative habits and institutions, intensified inflationary competition for scarce sources and thus continued to deeper geostrategic fault lines. Both domestic politics and strategic considerations explain the growing turn to protectionism, decoupling, and weaponizing interdependence, all symptoms of a system that lacks maintenance and risks breaking apart.

This is particularly apparent in Asia, where China's formidable rise has unsettled the balance of power amidst growing rivalry. The Sino-American partnership that allowed the continent to develop and progress in peace for almost five decades has collapsed, leading to new tensions around old issues, from the nuclear

balance in Northeast Asia, to the future of Taiwan, the South China Sea, and the weaponization of trade.

For India all these challenges and risks are real, but the current fog of systemic uncertainty is neither new nor necessarily a source of strategic anxiety. History shows how India's policy of non-alignment has often been a useful navigational device to adapt to change, craft a new balance, and preserve the country's cherished strategic autonomy. For example, after the 1960s, India gravitated to the Soviet Union in response to the United States' growing alignment with China and Pakistan. And after 1991, with the demise of the Soviet Union and a severe balance of payment crisis, the same proudly non-aligned and socialist India once again adapted to the new world order by reforming its economy, deepening engagement with the United States, and pursuing rapprochement with China.



16 June 2022. New Delhi, India. External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar at the Special ASEAN-India Foreign Ministers meeting. Credit: PTI.



1 September 2022. Sea of Japan. Opening ceremony of Vostok 2022. Credit: PTI Picture.

Today’s turbulence poses a similar test to India’s ambition to remain a self-reliant, independent pole in the changing world order. Yet while other countries may see the changing regional context as a challenge, New Delhi’s decision makers tend to perceive the rapidly evolving environment more optimistically, as an opportunity. This overall positive outlook is premised on the understanding that in times of global volatility, India’s bridging power assumes indispensable utility.

The idea of India as a swing state goes back to the 1950s, when Prime Minister Nehru invested in the non-alignment movement to push the centre of geopolitical gravity towards the post-colonial East and South. This idea of India as a structural bridge should not be equated with

policy abstention or neutrality, nor confused as a reflection of a naive and ideological vision. As the former Singaporean diplomat Bilahari Kausikan recently noted, even when India adopts a passive posture of inaction, it matters through its “sheer existence” for the rest of the continent. Especially in Asia, India is a pivotal player with geographic, demographic, military, and economic attributes that are bound to shape the balance of power and affect the rivalry calculations of both the United States and China.

This Indian self-perception shapes its pragmatic and even positive approach to the growing state of disorder. It permeates what India’s foreign minister S. Jaishankar identifies as “strategies for an uncertain world” in his recent book describing the

“India way” to international politics. As with India’s current security outlook, the book is pragmatically conscious about the risks of transition but also pregnant with options and possibilities to maximise regional influence and pursue a new global balance. This bridging posture was most recently in full display at the G20 summit in Bali, where India played a crucial backstage role to close policy gaps and produce a consensual statement.

## Challenges

There is rarely a calm period in India’s strategic environment, but the last two years have been particularly challenging. Most importantly, relations with China have witnessed a structural rupture after decades of gradual convergence

“The Sino-American partnership that allowed [Asia] to develop and progress in peace for almost five decades has collapsed ...”

since the 1962 war. The 2020 military confrontation between the two neighbours in the Himalayas, the first deadly one in 45 years, marked an irreversible downturn. While the conflict was local, focused on the territorial dispute, it had major economic and political repercussions, freezing the bilateral relationship at almost all levels. Beijing is keen to return to the status quo and normalise despite holding on to newly acquired territory, while New Delhi is adamant about the need for a hard reset. For the first time in several decades, there is no political capital left in New Delhi to invest in engaging and trusting China.

Similarly, an increasingly assertive China has also been encroaching on India's traditional sphere of influence in South Asia. Whether it is the formation of coalition governments in Nepal, military modernisation in Bangladesh, or the economic future of Sri Lanka, China is now a deeply entrenched player across the region, often at the expense of Indian interests. The recent visit of a Chinese spy ship to Sri Lanka's infamous port of Hambantota, despite India's vocal opposition, reflects how Beijing is now able to challenge India's maritime security interests in its own subcontinental periphery.

Military rule and continued conflict in Myanmar have also complicated

India's connectivity plans to the East, including new road, rail, and shipping links with the ASEAN region. Indian investments have suffered from sanctions targeting the praetorian regime even while China has consolidated its land access to the Bay of Bengal, further reducing its maritime reliance on the Malacca Straits.

To the West, backchannel talks with Pakistan have achieved no progress since the 2021 cease-fire. India remains a concerned spectator to Pakistan's cyclical civil-military tensions, its deteriorating financial health and its rising security and economic reliance on China. India's regional security environment has also suffered a setback with the fall of Kabul to the Taliban and a medley of terrorist groups that Pakistan has often played as proxies to target Indian interests.

At the global level, Russia's Ukraine invasion has posed the toughest test to India. It is unlikely that there is any Indian decision-maker left under the illusion that Russia will reverse its inevitable structural decline. But Moscow is still seen as a structural pole that India cannot afford to ignore or upset, which explains New Delhi's subdued reaction to the invasion and abstentions at the United Nations (UN).

Despite American and European pressures, India has stuck to its position for two different sets of reasons. Tangible tactical interests include Russia's predominant role as a reliable defence partner, energy requirements, and Moscow's veto power at the UN Security Council. More abstract strategic and signalling interests include India's efforts to reduce Russia's growing dependence on China and New Delhi's intent to portray itself diplomatically as an independent actor, able to withstand American pressure and lead the silent

majority of “third block” countries that have refused to take sides, several of which are to be found in Asia and Africa.

## Opportunities

The evolving regional security outlook brings a myriad of challenges, but India's eye is also set on seeing the horizon of opportunities that this brings. In New Delhi's perspective, China's growing centrality and influence has paradoxically triggered a new balancing behaviour by states across the region and beyond.

For example, after an initial enthusiasm with the Belt and Road Initiative whose investments have now largely dried up, several South and Southeast Asian countries are now seeking an alternative in India, whether by intensifying trade relations or pushing for closer defence cooperation. The Indian Navy has been in high demand for joint exercises and much of Asia has still not given up hope on India eventually joining RCEP or developing alternative trade partnerships such as the one it recently signed with Australia.

The Quad has been another preferred instrument for India to respond to a growing demand from countries seeking to diversify their relations and reduce their strategic dependence on China. Together with the United States, Japan and Australia, India has played a leading role in reviving the Quad since 2017 despite China's vocal opposition. Beijing is particularly worried about India's participation because it undermines its narrative about the Quad as an “Asian NATO” anchored in a security treaty relationship lead by the United States. China's concerns were most recently on display when its top diplomat in Dhaka warned Bangladesh against engaging the Quad in any way.

“India has been playing a silent but important role in pushing Brussels ...and other European capitals, to recognise that the future global balance of power hinges on what happens in Asia.”

Unperturbed by such admonitions and pressures, India has been playing an important role in recasting the Quad in a more civilian avatar, moderating its initial emphasis as a military and defence instrument. New Delhi is actively contributing to the Quad’s agenda for coordinated provision of public goods in Asia, including on vaccine production and distribution, resilient supply chains, open telecom architectures, maritime domain awareness and infrastructure financing.

India has also been pursuing the opportunity of trilateral engagements with other middle powers in Asia. This includes a growing collaboration on transportation infrastructure with Japan in the Bay of Bengal region, the strategic heart of the Indo-Pacific. New Delhi and Tokyo have been topping up their maritime security convergence with a growing geoeconomic agenda for a “free and open” Indo-Pacific, from sea lines of communication to exploring new defence industrial partnerships.

After a temporary setback due to the AUKUS deal, the France-India-Australia trilateral is also back on track. This initiative further mirrors New Delhi’s openness to think out

of its traditionally limited menu of alignment options. The three countries are now working in tandem, including by dividing labour towards coordinated naval patrols and capacity building programs for the Indian Ocean littoral and small island states. On its own, India is continuing to extend its out of area power projection capabilities, including through the induction of a new aircraft carrier, a defence pact with the Maldives, and upgrading its military installations on the Andaman and Nicobar archipelago.

India’s front footedness has also been manifest in its ability to accelerate the European Union’s Indo-Pacific reorientation. While the Russia-Ukraine war has momentarily diverted much of Europe’s political attention away from Asia, India has been playing a silent but important role in pushing Brussels, as well as Berlin and other European capitals, to recognise that the future global balance of power hinges on what happens in Asia. New Delhi has been positioning itself as the coordinating actor of a constellation of middle powers, a first among equals that share a common interest not to let China become a hegemonic power.

Finally, while India remains concerned about policy paralysis and continued institutional inequalities at the United Nations, it has also positively embraced alternative agendas to foster multilateralism and cooperation. Two of its recent institutional innovations include the International Solar Alliance and the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure: the United States, Japan, and Bangladesh are members of both, but China is conspicuously absent. India’s G20 Presidency in 2023 is expected to further signal India’s balancing act, with a developmental focus on inclusive financial, digital, health, and climate governance solutions.

While optimism is not a policy, it permeates India’s outlook of the rapidly changing security environment and explains the country’s proactive posture. New Delhi faces significant challenges but it also recognises that this is the time to deploy its bridging power between different actors to craft a new balance. Its ability to do so will hinge on its ability to execute important military and economic reforms at home and its capacity to leverage these new capabilities abroad.

## Dr. Constantino Xavier

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## Australia: Seeking a Security Posture that Will Shape and Survive a Powerful China

**James Curran**

Although 2022 brought a change of government in Australia and a new public tone to its diplomacy, particularly towards relations with China, Southeast Asia and the Pacific, it also revealed the hold of deep-seated geopolitical anxieties regarding the nation's strategic environment. While the new Labor government, led by Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, put aside the rhetoric about beating 'drums of war' and looked instead towards respectful, if cautious, cooperation with Beijing, it also

underlined its strong commitment to the pillars of its predecessors' policy: the American Alliance, AUKUS, and increased defence spending.

In November, Defence Minister Richard Marles, on the eve of the prime minister's meeting with Xi Jinping at the G20 Summit in Bali—the first such encounter between Australian and Chinese leaders since 2015—restated the primary driver of the nation's strategic policy, namely that “the world around us has become more uncertain and more precarious than at any time since the end of the Second World War”. The Indo-Pacific, he added, was the location of the “biggest military build-up we have seen anywhere in the world over the past 70 years” with the attendant risk that “this competition becomes confrontation”. Around the same time, Foreign Minister Penny Wong stressed that Australia faced “the most vexing set of circumstances in the post-war period”. Throughout the course of

the year, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and mounting tensions over Taiwan appeared to confirm American president Joe Biden's framing of a global contest between autocracies and democracies. The Australian national security community sees Canberra as being very much on the frontline of a 'new Cold War'.

“[Defence Minister Marles said in November 2022] the world around us has become more uncertain and more precarious than at any time since the end of the Second World War”

17 May 2022. Nhulunbuy, Australia. Exercise Crocodile Response. Credit: US Marine Corps Cpl. Cameron Hermanet.



These security concerns played a prominent part in the conduct of the May Federal election in Australia, although the poll did not become the khaki election some feared it might. Nevertheless, the announcement of the Solomon Islands/China security agreement, almost at the very moment campaigning got underway, brought into the sharpest possible focus the brewing concerns about China's reach into the Pacific. The deal was noteworthy because it established Beijing's legal right to send police and troops to protect its own citizens, as it sees them, regardless of how many generations they are divorced from residence in China.

Both sides of politics and the Australian public found the prospect of a potential Chinese military foothold of this kind profoundly disturbing, touching on fears that have animated policymakers since colonial times: a foreign power occupying a strategic launch pad in the Pacific. But the initial political response in Canberra at times opted for hyperbole over cool rationality. Some ministers adopted a crude realism which ironically threatened to bring on the very circumstances they were trying to avert. Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce saw Cuba off the Australian coast. Defence Minister Peter Dutton once more raised the spectre of the 1930s and Hitler's rise. Prime Minister Scott Morrison said that the prospect of China building a military base in the Solomon Islands would cross a "red line", but he consistently refused to lay out publicly how Australia would respond in any such eventuality.

Expectations were high, then, for the advent of a Labor government which had consistently emphasised out of office that it would prioritise diplomacy in setting the coordinates for Australian foreign and defence policy. And few would dispute the solid start the Prime Minister and senior



4 August 2022. Australian spy plane leads US B-2 stealth nuke bombers over Pacific. Credit: Air Force Tech. Sgt. Nick Wilson.

ministers made in their carriage of Australia's engagement with the world. Where continuity has been demanded – on the Quad, AUKUS and the US alliance – Labor has given willing assent. Where a change in tone was necessary, most clearly on relations with China and the Pacific, it has been expressed.

Mr Albanese's prime ministership got off to a flying start: no previous Australian prime minister has been sworn into office and travelled to such a key international gathering – a Quad leaders meeting in Tokyo – on the same day. Once there he struck a chord with the American president on climate change, backed AUKUS, won kudos from Quad leaders for attending the meeting so soon after winning office and reassured voters that a Labor government will not baulk in facing up to a more assertive China, especially in the Pacific.

Likewise, the government's first substantive foreign policy address, delivered by Foreign Minister Penny Wong on her visit to Fiji at the end of May, showed a return to first principles in Australian statecraft. That visit, against the backdrop

of a concerted Chinese attempt to secure a ten-nation Pacific security agreement, underlined Labor's election promise to move swiftly onto the front foot in the region. Ms Wong affirmed that Canberra would consistently proclaim to its neighbours and others "Australia's

"[Prime Minister Albanese told the press in November 2022] We know that China is Australia's largest trading partner; they are worth more than Japan, US and Republic of Korea together combined. So, it's an important relationship for Australia"



# REGIONAL SECURITY OUTLOOK 2023

full identity”. She explained that the 270 ancestries represented in the Australian population gives Canberra “the capacity to reach into every corner of the world”. It is, she added, a “vast untapped power in modern Australia”. There would be developed a “First Nations approach to foreign policy”. Not since the Whitlam and Keating Labor governments has Canberra made the connection between its ancient indigenous past, its multicultural reality, and its foreign policy posture. The foreign minister outlined practical steps to define a new era of Pacific engagement and delivered the key message with clarity – “nothing will change our geography, our proximity”, Ms Wong affirmed, or the fact that “our future is intertwined” with the South Pacific.

But while the Labor government broke decisively with the Morrison Cabinet’s tendency to shout at China, it was by no means playing down the difficulties of the relations with Beijing. Indeed, Australia and China continued to talk past each other. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi attributed the tensions over recent years entirely to Australia. In his first weeks in office, Prime Minister Albanese confessed too that there is still a “long way to go” and that the relationship will remain “problematic” for some time. Defence

Minister Richard Marles declared that China remains Australia’s “biggest security anxiety”. Trade Minister Don Farrell expressed a preparedness to “meet anywhere” with his Chinese counterpart but conceded that “we have put too much in the one basket in the past with our relationship with China”. Labor did achieve a cautious resumption of ministerial contact at the defence and foreign minister level but it did not lead to any reprieve from Chinese economic coercion. Two Australian citizens, Yang Hengjun and Cheng Lei, also remained detained in Chinese prisons on murky charges.

With ongoing anxieties about what China’s bullying and truculence means for Australian security, the Labor government was keen to emphasise that it would not only maintain but deepen the relationship with Washington. In early August the Prime Minister announced a Defence Strategic Review, to be conducted by Sir Angus Houston and former Defence Minister Stephen Smith – a review Marles said would be “bigger” than that delivered by Paul Dibb in the mid 1980s. The Houston/Smith report will be handed to government in March 2023 the primary purpose of which is to identify a clear path ahead on Australia’s acquisition of a nuclear

submarine capability under the auspices of the AUKUS agreement. Prime Minister Albanese has also been emphatic in his commitment to allocating the requisite funding to missiles, missile defence capabilities, and drones. Such funding was not “optional”, he said, but “necessary”.

Defence Minister Marles has been particularly forthright in expressing Labor’s ongoing commitment to the American alliance. “From an Australian point of view” he said in Hawaii following a meeting with his US counterpart Lloyd Austin in October, “our alliance with the United States is completely central to our national security and to our worldview”. During an official visit to Washington in July, Marles gave his personal blessing to the concept that Australian and US military forces would henceforth not only be interoperable but “interchangeable”. Spelling it out, he said the two forces could then “operate seamlessly together, at speed”. Mr Marles has emphasised that the US alliance, far from weakening Australian sovereignty, bolsters it. Indeed, in a major speech towards the end of the year he set out the policy objective: Australia desired to be “the most active participant in the alliance we can be”. This emerged from his



18 February 2022. A PLA Navy vessel transits the Torres Strait. Credit: Defence Department.

judgment that the idea of “simply paying the entry price to obtain our security guarantee” from America belongs to the past. Accordingly, Mr Marles has publicly spoken of his ambition to reconfigure the Australian Defence Forces so that it can “deploy and deliver combat power” via increased strike capability. This is the essence of what the Minister deems to be “impactful projection”.

These developments around Australia’s ability to project force and deter threats took place against the backdrop of ever more increasing tensions between the United States and China. In August, a visit to Taiwan by US House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi resulted in heightened tension in a US-China relationship already reeling from a five-year period pock marked with trade wars, rhetorical insults, and a downward spiral of mutual suspicion and enmity. In the wake of the visit, belligerents in Washington and in Beijing were only encouraged. But Australia had little option but to play a straight bat. Before the seriousness of China’s live-firing exercises—which amounted to a virtual blockade of the island—were known, Foreign Minister Wong initially emphasised that “all parties” should deescalate tensions. It might have been that Ms Wong, like the Biden White House, wished Pelosi hadn’t undertaken the visit. But as the gravity of the PLA moves became clearer the foreign minister made an emphatic call on Beijing to exercise restraint. In Washington, prominent Republicans spoke publicly about overturning the ‘One China’ policy and recognising Taiwanese independence.

The Albanese government has also been keen to emphasise a renewed dialogue and approach to its Southeast Asian neighbours. It has proclaimed that ‘ASEAN centrality’ is the lodestar of its regional approach. Foreign Minister Penny Wong, while stressing

that Canberra’s focus on ASEAN centrality “does not mean (an) ASEAN only” foreign policy, places the Quad and AUKUS in a broader narrative of regional security engagement: from Australia’s role in the Five Power Defence Arrangements with Malaysia and Singapore to its Comprehensive Strategic Framework with ASEAN. As Wong said in Singapore in July, ASEAN’s vision of regional order is “framed by a strategic equilibrium where countries are not forced to choose but can make their own sovereign choices, including about their alignments and partnerships”. Australia’s planned acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines, she added, should therefore be seen as “not...remarkable”. But Jakarta, at least, does not necessarily agree with that position.

Nevertheless, this stress on the individual agency of ASEAN countries is closer to the Australian orthodoxy, pursued by governments of both complexions since Australia’s engagement with the region acquired new meaning from the early 1970s. Canberra has not sought to dictate to its neighbours or publicly censure their different political systems.

While many commentators in Australia hoped for an immediate reset with Beijing with the coming of the new Labor government, such expectations were both undefined and unrealistic: the ‘China threat’ narrative and rhetoric still pulses strongly through the security and intelligence apparatus so dominant on Australia’s global outlook. The key advisers which shaped the policy response to China under Scott Morrison have been left in place. That means the harder thinking about the connection between economic and national security remains to be done. It also means that progress in the relationship with China, most visibly manifest in the prime minister’s short bilateral meeting with Chinese

President Xi Jinping in Bali, are interpreted by a vociferous group of commentators as proof less of a thaw in the diplomatic deep freeze, more that Australia gained the audience without concessions. Mr Albanese appears too determined to find his own way through the impasse. After meeting with the Chinese president, he noted that Australia sought a “stable” relationship with China while “managing differences” through “constructive dialogue”. And he stated a home truth that has been missing from much of the Australia-China debate over the last five years. “We know that China is Australia’s largest trading partner”, the Prime Minister told the press. And in case any of them had missed the import of his statement, he added that “they are worth more than Japan, US and Republic of Korea together combined. So, it’s an important relationship for Australia”.

The Prime Minister knows the path ahead will not be smooth. Negative attitudes towards China in the political culture and populace are entrenched. Over the preceding four years, the chief proponents of the view that Australia faces an existential threat to its security and prosperity—particularly those in the press, security services, intelligence agencies and in government—marshalled an array of slogans that touched on powerful memories in the national psychology. They put historical experience into a straitjacket and applied the supposed lessons of Munich, appeasement, and the Cold War indiscriminately. The result is a debate over Australian foreign policy which may, for some time yet, struggle to break free of this stifling inflexibility.

## James Curran

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# Indonesia: Between Expectations and Navigating a Challenging Future

**Lina Alexandra**

From time to time, Indonesia has seen security threats as arising primarily from the domestic sphere, mainly from terrorist acts, armed insurgency movements in Papua and West Papua provinces, as well as social and religious tensions. With the COVID-19 pandemic, prolonged by a succession of new variants, the health issue became a primary security challenge as dealing with its impact absorbed much of the government’s energy and weakened the state’s economic performance.

With national elections due in 2024, 2023 will be a political year for Indonesia, effectively an extended campaign season rife with social tensions as politicians enthusiastically play their ideology-ethno-religious cards to gain votes. While the government’s attention will inevitably be drawn to these domestic security issues it must also be prepared to deal with other challenges. As the largest country in Southeast Asia, and particularly since its success as G20 Chair in 2022 as well as assuming the

ASEAN Chair in 2023, Indonesia will be expected and pressured to play a significant role in working together with its surrounding countries as well as the major powers to deal with various regional and global security challenges. As ASEAN is currently overshadowed by the intensifying major power rivalry as well as with its own internal crisis, expectations are particularly high for Indonesia’s chairmanship to restore ASEAN’s credibility and centrality. Given what has unfolded in 2022, Indonesia’s government will be bracing itself to manage multiple coincident challenges and the complexities stemming from the interplay of domestic, regional, and international turbulence.

There are at least three major security concerns that Indonesia will have to address in the coming year. The first is the escalation of the Russia-Ukraine crisis. As more states have been sucked into supporting one side or the other—for example, Iran sending its ‘Kamikaze’ drones to bombard vital Ukrainian infrastructure and Israel

eventually joining NATO’s ban after earlier rejecting the same request from Ukraine, the crisis has both widened and deepened. Furthermore, the persistent consideration being given, particularly by Russia, to the deployment of chemical, biological, even nuclear weapons is giving the crisis nightmarish dimensions. Furthermore, it has become steadily clearer that the crisis is not simply about “Ukraine”; rather it is a proxy for a wider contest between the US and Western powers and the Russia-China partnership. So far, China’s official position is to support Ukraine’s sovereignty while at the same time not openly condemning Russia’s invasion. Opinion polling shows that China’s enduring partnership with Russia is seen in the US as a serious security concern and can be expected to aggravate the US-China rivalry.

Once seen as a far-away crisis with no direct impact on Southeast Asia, Indonesia’s foremost concern is the impact of the Ukraine crisis on global supply chains and the health of the

“As the largest country in Southeast Asia, and particularly since its success as G20 Chair in 2022 as well as assuming the ASEAN Chair in 2023, Indonesia will be expected and pressured to play a significant role...”



21 March 2022. Jakarta, Indonesia. Welcoming ceremony prior to official US-Indonesian regional security talks. Credit: US Navy Chief Mass Communication Specialist Joshua Bryce Bruns.



14-15 August 2022. Arabian Sea. Indonesian and EU navies, Operation Atalanta. Credit: European Union.

global economy in the post-pandemic world. The war in Ukraine has forced the Indonesian government to respond on two fronts in particular. First, to secure the supply of commodities, such as wheat and potassium that are critical to domestic food production given that Ukraine and Russia are major suppliers of these commodities. Second, the continuing tension between Russia and the NATO countries constituted a major challenge to the success of Indonesia's G20 presidency. As G7 countries were determined to express their condemnation of Russia's invasion, including in preparatory meetings for the G20 summit, Indonesia has been challenged to think hard on how to protect the group's main economic agenda from being overwhelmed by the fierce political brawl over the situation in Ukraine.

As President of the G20, Indonesia needed to keep open its channels of communication with all members, even if it meant toning down its

strong opposition to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The G20 Bali Leaders' Declaration issued on 16 November 2022 at the end of the Summit held on 14-15 November clearly stipulated that the war in Ukraine put further pressure on the global economy already badly damaged by the pandemic and climate change. The condemnation of Russia's aggression and the necessity for its withdrawal was clearly stated early in paragraph 3 of the Declaration. Prior to this, in Session I on Global Economic Condition, Food Security, and Energy, President Widodo, while referring to the "extraordinary efforts" needed to bring leaders "together in the same room", also stressed that they were not only responsible to their own people but also to the world. He declared that being responsible meant "respecting international laws and principles of the UN Charter consistently, creating win-win and not zero-sum situations" to underline the point that war in Ukraine had to end for the world to move forward.

"the Russia-Ukraine crisis points to the importance of Indonesian decisionmakers looking more deeply into the nexus between the political-security and economic domains."

The second major security threat comes from within the Southeast Asia region itself, namely the deepening Myanmar crisis since the military coup on 1 February 2021. Despite ASEAN's efforts to develop the Five-Point Consensus (FPC) that calls for all parties to cease the violence, for ASEAN to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian assistance through



8 July 2022. Bali, Indonesia. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken attends the G20 Foreign Ministers' Meeting. Credit: State Department / Ron Przsuscha.

the AHA Centre and for the ASEAN Chair's Special Envoy to promote dialogue among the stakeholders, no significant implementation can be seen thus far. The recent ASEAN Emergency Ministers' Meeting on Myanmar held on 27 October 2022 in Jakarta still displayed ASEAN's indecisiveness on what the organisation should do after being frustrated by the junta's violent acts and simply pushed any final decision into the future.

Although Indonesia has been at the forefront of efforts to find ways for ASEAN to assist Myanmar, the fact that it will become ASEAN Chair in 2023 means that its responsibilities in this regard will only grow larger. The State Administration Council (SAC), a body created by the junta, plans to hold an election by August 2023 to give more legitimacy to the junta's rule. These elections will likely attract strong opposition from the pro-democratic groups who consider the results of the November 2020 elections

to be fully legitimate and further elections wholly redundant. The outbreak of armed clashes between the military forces and the People Defense Forces (PDF) would certainly smear ASEAN's credibility. Thus, it is a real challenge for Indonesia next year to push for significant progress and break the impasse of this regional crisis.

The third security concern is the intensifying US-China rivalry and the heightening tensions in the cross-straits relations. The recent 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in October 2022, which affirmed President Xi's absolute power, would certainly have boosted Chinese leadership confidence in dealing with the US, particularly regarding the Taiwan issue. Prior to this, following Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in early August 2022, China has expressed its anger by conducting multi-days military drills in the waters and airspace around Taiwan, including the launching of ballistic missiles for the first time in many years. Then, in the

sidelines meeting during the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in August 2022, Foreign Minister Wang Yi sternly warned that "those who offend China will be punished." While some are concerned that the heightened tensions associated with Ukraine could trigger a parallel crisis in the Indo-Pacific, it still seems unlikely that China will become casual or careless in its approach to the Taiwan question. This cautious optimism is supported by the long and apparently substantive bilateral meeting between Xi and Biden in the margins of the G20 summit in Bali.

Looking at these emergencies, there are three important takeaways for Indonesia. First, the Russia-Ukraine crisis points to the importance of Indonesian decisionmakers looking more deeply into the nexus between the political-security and economic domains. While Indonesia's current administration has put much emphasis on protecting its economy and securing growth by attracting investments

and enhancing trade relations, more attention should be given to how Indonesia should strategically make its standpoint on global political and security issues.

President Widodo may be leading the way on this front. At the recent G20 Summit, he referred specifically to the impact of war on food security, urging his fellow leaders to not “underestimate the issue of fertilizer” and going on to introduce the notion of “fertilizer insecurity” as the precursor to food insecurity. This mindset should be the starting point for policymakers to look for synergies and tensions between issues and to avoid rigid compartmentalisation.

The interlinkage of issues requires the government not to compartmentalise its efforts, but to seek a sensible balance that allows policy settings in the economic and security spheres to at least coexist and, ideally, to be complementary. While keeping with its independence and active foreign policy doctrine, Indonesia should not shy away and hide behind its principle: independence should not be equated with neutrality. As the biggest country in Southeast Asia, with strong prospects of becoming a key middle power in the next decade, Indonesia must engage and play its full role at the regional and global levels.

Second, with its upcoming position as the ASEAN Chair in 2023, Indonesia should be able to formulate priorities to help the organisation to reaffirm and strengthen (or as some believe, to regain) its relevance. Here, the Myanmar crisis is the inescapable litmus test. Holding ASEAN together and demonstrating that progress on its core principles—promotion of democracy, rule of law, good governance, and human rights protection—remain priority aspirations for all members is a

formidable task. That is only to be expected. ASEAN is a vital cog in a vital region of the world and its importance to the stability and prosperity of the region will always trend upwards.

Third, at the same time, being able to handle its own internal crisis would contribute positively to ASEAN’s aspiration to achieve centrality in its interactions with the major powers. Looking at likelihood of heightening tensions among the major powers, ASEAN centrality has acquired greater importance. Centrality is not simply being at the centre – or using ASEAN’s alternative term – being in the driver’s seat. Rather, ASEAN should be able to set up the agenda, convene major powers to participate and be loyal to ASEAN-led multilateral platforms despite having their own initiatives, and definitely working together with its Dialogue Partners to implement what has been agreed. While centrality needs support from the major powers, its efficacy does not solely depend on them. Rather, the key is for ASEAN member states themselves to be united and, more importantly, to own their own initiatives and platforms.

In this context, Indonesia should push for the implementation of the ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific (AOIP). While elucidating what the regional countries wish to see amidst the contestation among the major powers, simply having the document is not enough. There is a need for a further push to develop the Outlook into concrete strategy and plans. Rather than creating new institutions or platforms, ASEAN can revisit the existing mechanisms and upgrade the useful ones. One possibility is to rejuvenate the East Asia Summit (EAS) which essentially is the embodiment of how ASEAN centrality should be applied in relations with the major powers. Nonetheless, it needs to be re-worked to take it beyond

occasional summit meetings, adding in technical-level mechanisms to enable EAS to become a real platform for interactions between ASEAN and its Dialogue Partners and to come up with concrete policies. While some point to the emerging trend of mini-lateral initiatives by the major powers as evidence of their ambivalence toward ASEAN, it also serves as a double-edged sword that reveals ASEAN’s own internal weaknesses in respect of sustaining its own multilateral platforms.

Thus, next year is going to be a decisive moment for Indonesia. Time will reveal whether Indonesia can manage to navigate its way safely and constructively through the array of complex challenges, both those we know of and those yet to emerge.

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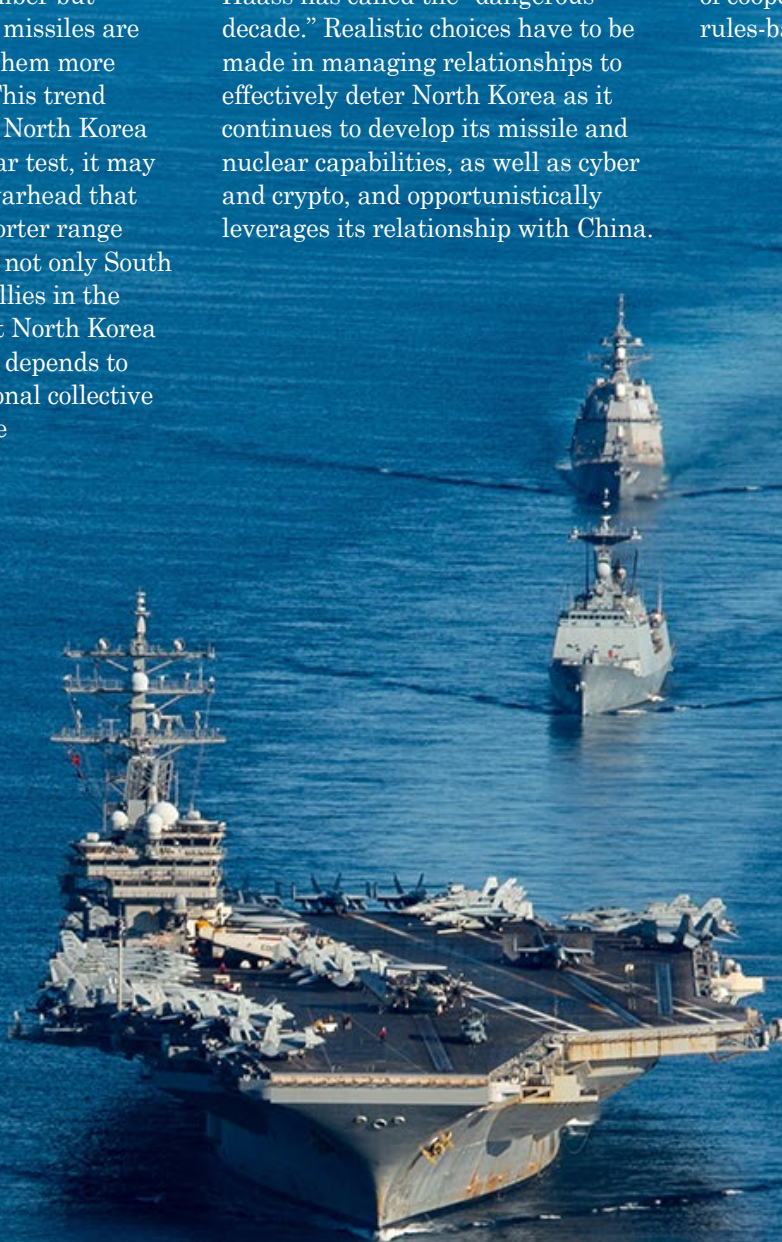
## South Korea: Realising Pivotal Aspirations in the Indo-Pacific

### Bo Ram Kwon

Since early 2022, North Korea has returned to testing a record number of ballistic missiles and has even rehearsed nuclear missile attacks against South Korea. The provocations have not only increased in sheer number but also in the ways these missiles are being tested, making them more difficult to intercept. This trend raises concerns that if North Korea conducts its 7th nuclear test, it may be a tactical nuclear warhead that can be mounted on shorter range missiles that threaten not only South Korea but also other allies in the region. Whether or not North Korea will go down this path depends to some degree on a regional collective response as well as the ROK-US alliance.

South Korea's security outlook is shaped by its ambitions to play a larger role in the Indo-Pacific region as well as by constraints that are characterised by its evolving threat perceptions what Richard Haass has called the "dangerous decade." Realistic choices have to be made in managing relationships to effectively deter North Korea as it continues to develop its missile and nuclear capabilities, as well as cyber and crypto, and opportunistically leverages its relationship with China.

Maintaining an ironclad alliance with the US is given top priority to bolster deterrence against North Korea but, as a major hub in the US alliance network, importance is also attached to expanding the frontiers of cooperation in order to uphold the rules-based international order.



30 September 2022. East of the Korean Peninsula. US, ROK, Japan trilateral anti-submarine warfare exercise. Credit: US Navy Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Daniel G. Providakes.

“China is in a position to deter North Korea’s further testing or use of nuclear weapons as well as to influence its coming to the negotiation table.”

Meanwhile, South Korea strives to maintain strategic cooperation with China due to its unique dependence on the Chinese market and Beijing’s political influence in Pyongyang. Although its willingness is in doubt, China is in a position to deter North Korea’s further testing or use of nuclear weapons as well as to influence its coming to the negotiation table. Against this background, the intensifying strategic competition between the US and China has placed South Korea in a difficult position. Indeed, these fundamentals are not new. However, the neo-Cold War situation makes choices harder to make as rogue states become more opportunistic and major powers more nationalistic.

Emphasising the need for a clear national strategy to navigate the complex security environment, President Yoon Suk-yeol came into power last May. The basis for his foreign policy was to sculpt a larger role for South Korea as a middle power in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond, that is, to become a Global Pivotal State. The intent was to broaden its diplomatic bandwidth to harness the region as a whole to secure its national interest rather than focus solely on engagement with North Korea to resolve the nuclear problem. In the following months, and particularly this past November, the Yoon administration has taken bold

steps to expand and deepen new and existing partnerships in the region while developing its own strategic vision for the Indo-Pacific. These endeavours are being supplanted by diversification of economic partners as well as upgrades in defence partnerships, efficient resource allocation, and innovative investments in the defence sector.

First, building stronger and expansive ties begins with reinforcing the ROK-US alliance. The ROK-US Summit held in May produced a joint statement and detailed fact sheet that reinforced the deterrence dimension of the military alliance as well as specific venues for cooperation on technology and defence. This largely reflected what was agreed upon in the Moon administration, which shows continuity in underlying strategic thought with regard to alliances despite different displays of allegiance under progressive and conservative Korean governments. South Korea and the US have not only revamped their joint military training and exercises to send a strong message to North Korea, but the US has also reaffirmed its commitment to extended deterrence.

The 54th Security Consultative Meeting specified that the US will utilise “the full range of its defense capabilities, including nuclear, conventional and missile defense capabilities and advanced non-nuclear capabilities.” Any attack on the US or its allies, including the use of non-strategic nuclear weapons, will result in the “end of the Kim regime.” Both countries will strengthen information sharing, consultation process, as well as joint planning and execution to deter and respond to North Korea’s threats. The US also promised to increase the frequency and scale of strategic asset deployments to the peninsula, as well as jointly enhancing space and cyber capabilities through better

communication and joint exercises. Furthermore, the allies agreed to hold annual TTX that includes a scenario where North Korea uses its nuclear weapons.

South Korea is also raising its profile as an advocate of free and open trade, which speaks on behalf of all stakeholders in the Indo-Pacific region that have benefited from the current trade and finance system. The US is harnessing its economic power that comes from the ability to restrict other states’ access to crucial goods, services, finance, and information to win the strategic competition with China. Concerns are rising that the US is using protectionist policies for nationalistic purposes, which places its economic security interests before those of the rest, even its closest allies. Legislation such as the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) and CHIPS and Science Act (CSA) are geared toward creating an exclusively favourable environment for American or US-based firms and disadvantaging those who do not comply with its regulations and continue to rely on Chinese materials or its market. This was the case for South Korean firms such as Hyundai Motor Company, Samsung Electronics, and SK Hynix. Economic security is now considered to be equivalent to national security, and serious discussions are needed in bilateral and multilateral settings to identify ways to make allies and partners “co-prosper” before prescribing “collective resilience.” This refers to the US asking like-minded states to bear with major economic and political costs now in return for perhaps larger but uncertain benefits in the future to comply with its initiative to decouple from the Chinese economy, especially in critical technologies.

Second, South Korea is diversifying its security partnerships to include members of NATO, ASEAN, and the Pacific Islands that are region-based,



# REGIONAL SECURITY OUTLOOK 2023

as well as coalitions like Fab 4 (a.k.a. Chip 4) that are capabilities-oriented. As a non-member of the Quad, AUKUS, or Five Eyes, South Korea felt it had fallen behind and looked to new minilateral partnerships to catch up. Such a latticework of agile partnerships is what the Biden administration prioritises to sustain its influence in the Indo-Pacific region. South Korea's relationship with China may have initially lowered the chance to join these coalitions but it is making its way back into the game through proactive diplomatic efforts. President Yoon attended the NATO summit in Madrid for the first time this year alongside Australia, Japan, and New Zealand where the joint communique recognised China as a threat for the first time. South Korea has joined the Indo-Pacific

Economic Framework (IPEF) as a founding member. It hosted the 5th Korea-Pacific Islands Foreign Ministers Meeting and plans to host the first summit meeting with Pacific Islands Countries (PIC) in 2023. South Korea was invited to join Fab 4 along with Taiwan and Japan, a US initiated coalition of semiconductor producers that aims to create a resilient chip supply chain. Since it is highly dependent on both US technology and China's market, South Korea is wary about the consequences of joining this pact given that China is strongly opposed to it.

Third, South Korea presented its own Indo-Pacific strategy framework during the recent ROK-ASEAN Summit held in Cambodia. It offers a vision of a free, peaceful,

and prosperous Indo-Pacific region built on a rules-based order and underlines the importance of core values such as freedom, human rights, and the rule of law. It also condemns unilateral change of the status quo by force. What motivates this strategy is the shift in security landscape where China and Russia are engaging in revisionist actions, the growing importance of economic security, and the demands of next generation Koreans for more active global engagement. However, there are significant constraints that South Korea needs to consider, which differentiates its strategy from that of other like-minded nations. For one, North Korea is the primary existential threat. The Yoon administration proposed the "Audacious Initiative" that calls for



5 October 2022. South Korea. South Korea and the US joint missile firing drills. Credit: Joint Chiefs of Staff / EPA-EFE.

“ROK-Japan bilateral relations are mired in history issues, but recent diplomatic developments suggest that the talks may inch forward.”

the denuclearisation of North Korea in exchange for sizable economic incentives. Next, strategic cooperation with China must be sustained. The Yoon administration emphasises the need to pursue common interests based on “mutual respect and reciprocity” while drawing a clear line against coercive and revisionist behaviour that strains or breaches the rules-based order. It seeks to keep the South China Sea peaceful and prosperous, and acknowledges the need to preserve peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. Lastly, trilateral security cooperation with the US and Japan is necessary to effectively deter North Korea and negotiate from a position of strength. The leaders of the ROK, US, and Japan produced a comprehensive joint statement at the ASEAN Summit for the first time. This includes a commitment to information sharing on North Korea’s missile provocations, establishment of economic and security talks, trilateral cooperation to respond to economic coercion, and trilateral cooperation on complex challenges that include supply chain disruption, climate change, and emergence of a digital economy. By way of these commitments, the US and Japan pledged to support ROK’s implementation of its Indo-Pacific strategy. Still, national sentiment imposes certain limitations when it comes to military exercises near

the peninsula. ROK-Japan bilateral relations are mired in history issues, but recent diplomatic developments suggest that the talks may inch forward.

In all, South Korea is poised to increase bilateral, minilateral, and multilateral security cooperation in the region as its Indo-Pacific strategy pivots it closer towards the US. Likely partners include Australia, Japan, and European allies, as well as ASEAN. Of particular note is that the Yoon administration has proposed an engagement policy towards Southeast Asia that succeeds and builds upon the New Southern Policy by notably strengthening the “peace” pillar. This goes by the name of Korea-ASEAN Solidarity Initiative. Not only has it pledged to increase and diversify economic cooperation with ASEAN member states, South Korea will reinforce defence ties by organising a meeting between the respective defence ministers and proactively taking part in joint military exercises with ASEAN member states. Since the mid-2000s, South Korea has steadily increased its participation in multinational military exercises in the Indo-Pacific region and has earned recognition as a reliable partner. During RIMPAC this year, a South Korean national served as the Commander of Combined Task Force (CTF) 176.

In addition, South Korea is not shy about its defence building ambitions and these have been reflected in steady defence budget increases across the last several administrations. Arms exports to Southeast Asia and recently Europe (i.e. Poland) have significantly increased and now the Middle East shows potential. The war in Ukraine has played a part. However, the rise in sales has benefited from South Korea’s capable defence industrial base and cost-effective conventional capabilities as well as its willingness

to transfer sufficient technology for maintenance and repair and standard operation procedures to its partners. This is the essence of capacity building in the region. As a US ally that respects the value of freedom, transparency, and the rule of law, South Korea is in good standing to increase interoperability among a wider range of partners and become a true force multiplier in the Indo-Pacific region.

South Korea’s aspirations to become a global pivotal player are not entirely new or improbable. However, the Yoon administration’s strategic drive comes at a crucial time when North Korea is bent on heightening tensions on the Korean peninsula and the US and China are narrowly focused on competing to win. The war in Ukraine creates an opportunity for North Korea to take advantage of the rift between democratic and non-democratic leagues, which makes it even more difficult for diplomacy to deliver positive results. South Korea’s Indo-Pacific strategy framework is still in its early stages, but the direction is set and holds promise to contribute to peace and stability in the region.

## Bo Ram Kwon

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# Thailand’s Bamboo Diplomacy in the Age of Geopolitical Rivalry: Bending or Gone with the Wind?

Jittipat Poonkham



8 June 2022. Bangkok, Thailand. Senior Leader’s Dialogue at the Thailand Ministry of Defence Headquarters. Credit: US Navy Chief Mass Communication Specialist Joshua Bryce Bruns.

Metaphorically, Thailand’s security and foreign policy is commonly characterised as “bamboo”, bending with the changing wind. This flexible and pragmatic diplomacy, so the story goes, has helped the country survive and progress throughout its history.

It is no surprise that, even in the current era of geopolitical competition, Thailand’s security and foreign policy establishment seems to assert that Thailand can sustain its relatively neutral posture and avoid choosing sides on the major international disputes.

Similarly, the Prayut government claims that since the 2019 elections, Thailand has succeeded in maintaining good relations with all countries and playing constructive roles in the international and regional arenas.

During Thailand’s ASEAN chairmanship in 2019, the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP)

has been adopted and highlights the significance of cooperation on non-traditional security in four areas such as maritime issues, connectivity, sustainable development, and broader areas of economic cooperation. Unlike the major powers’ Indo-Pacific outlooks, ASEAN deemphasises the great power rivalry and instead focuses on inclusiveness and ASEAN centrality.

In 2022, Thailand hosted the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meeting under the slogan of “Open, Connect, Balance”. According to Prayut, Thailand’s APEC chairmanship would emphasise the three main tasks: (1) facilitating trade and investment; (2) rebooting regional connectivity, particularly in the travel and tourism industry; and (3) advancing sustainable and inclusive growth. These priorities underscore Thailand’s commitment to promoting multilateral and South-South cooperation to ensure balanced

development and the post-COVID-19 recovery.

## Hedging by Default?

In practice, Prayut’s version of bamboo diplomacy (or in fact the appearance of a balanced or neutral posture on major contemporary issues) presents a misleading picture and has limited the strategic posture and options for Thailand. There are three important reasons for this, both domestically and internationally. Global geopolitical competition and

“Many ASEAN countries including Bangkok are dubious of America’s long term strategic commitment.”



14 August 2022. Udon Thani Province, Thailand. Falcon Strike between the Thai-Chinese Air Force. Credit: thailand.postsen.com.

the war in Ukraine contest the effectiveness of Thai foreign policy.

First of all, Thai foreign policy under Prayut has not been driven by a strategic, whole-of-government assessment of Thai interests and options. The outcomes may resemble deliberate hedging but the main cause is different government agencies indulging their own preferences, orientations, and options. This is more accurately characterised as hedging by default where genuine balance or neutrality occurs only by accident.

The second reason is that in recent years, Thailand is increasingly edging toward a closer and more comprehensive strategic partnership with China, rather than adopting a full-fledged bamboo diplomacy. This is due to three main factors: (1) the rise of China and its economic attractiveness; (2) the US' declining position and diminishing strategic commitment in the region; and (3) Thailand's weakened national strategic posture and limited options after the coup. The Western sanctions triggered by the coup further stimulated the Sino-centric approach

to Thai foreign policy. Thailand's road back to elections and the changing global context thereafter have not altered this approach.

Although Thailand's Chinese High-Speed Railway remains uncertain and behind schedule (as of November 2022), Washington's Build Back Better World (B3W) 'high-quality' infrastructure investment schemes are relatively lower in volumes than Xi Jinping's infrastructure investment projects under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Consequently, Thailand has been gradually drawn towards Beijing's trade and infrastructural power.

According to Prayut, the Thai government is attempting to attract investments from other countries, particularly China, by improving Thailand's infrastructure and developing new industrial zones such as the Eastern Economic Corridor. He has said that Thailand is looking to boost its partnership with China for a future that is "strong, wealthy and sustainable"—and referring to China and Thailand not as strangers but as "brothers and sisters".

The US posture in and towards Asia is another factor contributing to Thailand's genuflection toward Beijing. Many ASEAN countries including Bangkok are dubious of America's long term strategic commitment and anxious about Biden's unsubstantiated plans in the region. Notwithstanding his promises to ASEAN leaders of "a new era in US-ASEAN relations" at a meeting in Washington DC in May 2022, the Biden administration has not channelled massive investments towards the region. Nor is rebooting trade relationships promising since Biden is not considering re-joining the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), that President Trump pulled out of in 2017. Biden's unilateral initiative, the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF)—which is instrumental to promote economic cooperation in key areas like trade facilitation, clean energy, and anticorruption—is not explicitly a free trade agreement that would allow ASEAN countries' greater access to American markets.

In addition, America's approach to the free and open Indo-Pacific, which is fixated on China as a strategic rival, raises regional concerns of ultimately having to choose sides. Biden's liberal rules-based international order is also antagonistic to some autocratic regimes in ASEAN, notably Myanmar.

In his first visit to Southeast Asia as president, Biden attended the ASEAN-US Summit in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, on 12 November 2022 and elevated this relationship to that of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. While Prayut's Thailand praised the new partnership as a boost for global sustainable development, China's growing influence in Asia appears to be Biden's main concern. The

“Despite being a longtime ally of the US, Thailand is leaning closer and closer toward China.”

value of ASEAN-China trade soared 28 percent to \$878 billion in 2021, which was almost double the \$441 billion in total trade between ASEAN and the US.

In Phnom Penh, the US could not achieve any sort of consensus with ASEAN leaders about pushing back against China’s growing maritime assertiveness in the South China Sea. Simply put, the ASEAN-US Summit did not come up with anything concrete beyond, symbolically at least, putting the US at the same level as China, which concluded a comprehensive strategic partnership with the ASEAN bloc last year.

Overall, America’s overemphasis on the China threat has backfired in its relationship with mainland Southeast Asian nations, including Thailand, which have tremendous economic ties with Beijing. Lastly, the uncertainty of the 2024 presidential election in the US, particularly the prospect of Trump’s return to the presidency, generates mixed feelings in the region.

This leads to the third reason why Thailand’s foreign policy outlook is circumscribed. Thailand’s international image and reputation has been critically interrogated in recent years, especially during Russia’s invasion of Ukraine since 24 February 2022.

Prime Minister Prayut proclaimed that Thailand would remain neutral in the conflict while Foreign Minister

Don Pramudwinai was reported to say that there was no need for Thailand to “rush into playing a role.” In fact, the war in Ukraine derails and destroys the legal principle of state sovereignty under the auspice of UN Charter that Thailand has long recognised and upheld.

For the first time in Thailand’s diplomatic history, the oft-cited tradition of “bamboo diplomacy” has been publicly criticised. Some call the official Thai position “spineless” and lacking all principle. Liberals and many younger citizens have called for a tougher stance against Russia’s aggression.

Although Thailand at first had voted in favour of a UNGA resolution to deplore Russia’s actions in early March, the country has more recently abstained from a vote to condemn Russia’s annexation of four eastern regions of Ukraine in October. The Prayut government cited concerns that it would reduce the chances for diplomacy to bring about a negotiated solution. Among the 10-nation ASEAN community, only three countries including Thailand joined China and India in abstaining. Unlike India, Thailand’s abstention is not seen as a manifestation of neutrality or non-alignment.

In the short term, Thailand’s stance on the Russia-Ukraine War has undermined its prestige internationally. We now know that for various reasons, key global leaders—like Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin—did not attend the APEC summit in Bangkok in November 2022. In the long term, the hedging by default approach to foreign affairs has left partners, friends, and others uncertain and exposed Thailand’s national interests.

The old narrative of bamboo diplomacy no longer makes sense in the changing configuration of power. Emerging around the early 1970s,

this discursive strategy seemed to work quite well, especially during the era of détente. Very recently, bamboo diplomacy is seen as an approach that is reactive, safe, and supportive of the status quo. That is, following bamboo diplomacy, Thailand merely reacts and adapts to transformation in the global and regional environment. At the same time, it lacks visionary leadership, proactive prescription, and the need to implement innovative policies. Thailand tends to follow the rules of the game (of great powers), especially those that fits easily with its interests, thereby bending with the wind.

Contemporary circumstances, however, have generated stronger demands for Thailand to declare standards and principles and to live up to them as well as to be involved in setting the rules of the game at least with respect to the security and economic architectures at the regional level.

## **The Way Forward: Leading from the Middle**

Cultivating a coherent and resilient foreign policy in the emerging bipolar world in the Indo-Pacific, Thailand requires more than just applying bamboo diplomacy. The latter is not really effective for avoiding the trap of a regional security dilemma. It is too risky and costly for the national interests of middle and small states relative to the gains that might be realised by pursuing this approach.

Thailand does not simply lack agency. It lacks transformative agency as well as a proactive, prudential, and progressive strategy. What we really need is a new strategic narrative to make sense of the changing world and to facilitate smart decisions on where Thailand should seek to fit within it.

First, we should aspire to bend ahead of the wind. That is, Thailand should develop a strategy that balances

power and purpose, means and ends. In the past, Thailand used to bend before the wind.

For instance, in 1968, then foreign minister Thanat Khoman coined the term “flexible diplomacy” amid the American retrenchment from the region and explored diplomatic alternatives. He had changed course even before the promulgation of the Nixon Doctrine. Similarly, General Chatchai Choonhavan, Prime Minister in the late 1980s, launched the policy of “turning a battlefield into a marketplace” in Indochina, which transcended regional power politics and rendered the regional Cold War absolutely obsolete.

Second, it is necessary to revitalise so-called “equidistant diplomacy”. Basically, equidistant diplomacy is employed by the state to project and signal a neutral image and posture. It is the aspiration to maintain its independence and develop cordial relations with all powers. Thailand should adopt this equidistant diplomacy not just rhetorically or as a tactic of perception management but as a genuine policy objective.

In the past, General Kriangsak Chomanan, Thai Prime Minister from 1977 until 1980, pursued equidistant diplomacy by maintaining working relationship with great powers and visiting Washington, Beijing, and Moscow in the late 1970s before General Prem Tinsulanonda tilted Thailand closer to China and the US in the Third Indochina War.

Third, given the fact that the geopolitical wind today is extremely strong, bamboo diplomacy is less viable than the past. In such a strong wind, even bamboo is likely to break. Rather, Thailand should adopt what I would like to call a “leading-from-the-middle” strategy, which is a combination of hedging and collective/comprehensive security strategy.

Leading from the middle is defined as a strategic vision that a small-to-middle state pursues in order to hedge with the great powers, bind them within a rule or norm-based order while simultaneously initiating region-wide politico-diplomatic innovations and advocacy. The strategy aims at seeking to reduce strategic uncertainty for small and middle states amid great power rivalries.

Avoiding a regional security dilemma outcome, which could eventually force the regional players to choose between China and the US, is paramount. Yet that outcome would seem largely unavoidable if more zero-sum approaches are pursued without modification. Hedging by itself, for example, increases the potential for the so-called “Thucydides Trap”, precipitating hegemonic warfare between the rising and declining powers.

Leading-from-the-middle strategy by contrast reinforces hedging’s more positive attributes by strengthening Thailand’s (and ASEAN’s) bargaining leverage to encourage the US and China to respect their interests and, in the longer term, to avoid succumbing to the temptation of bandwagoning (another traditional and zero-sum strategy if pursued exclusively) with the US or balancing China that could lead to an increasingly tense regional security environment.

To conclude, we now know that Thailand’s security and foreign policy is no longer a bamboo bending with the wind. Despite being a long-time ally of the US, Thailand is leaning closer and closer toward China, especially in the economic arena. In a nascent bipolar international society, which is driven by the clash of great powers and the concomitant clash of international orders and value systems, Thailand rhetorically

appears to hedge with all major powers—thereby hedging by default—without forging a strategic position.

This is largely because Thailand has encountered discursive anxiety that the old narrative is no longer plausible while it has not yet explored and developed a new strategic discourse to make sense of the disruptive world. Amidst the critical juncture of geopolitical competition in the Indo-Pacific region, it is urgent for Thailand to find an alternative approach to foreign policy, and which transcends the oft-cited tradition of bamboo diplomacy. The scale and pace of change in Thailand’s political, economic and security environment calls for bold new approaches such as the leading from the middle strategy outlined above. Without this, it is likely that the country would risk being gone with the wind in the twenty-first century international relations.

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## The Philippines': Security Outlook Under the New Marcos Administration

**Charmaine Misalucha-  
Willoughby**

In May 2022, the Philippines elected Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos, Jr. as president. Marcos is the son of the former dictator and his namesake who ruled the country from 1965 to 1986 in what is documented as one of the most violent periods in Philippine history. Marcos’ campaign relied heavily on an intricate information ecosystem, which he utilised for years before the 2022 election. He benefited from coordinated amplification online, especially regarding stories that depict the martial law years under his father’s rule as the “golden age” of the country. Aside from historical revisionism, the information network

exaggerated the Marcos family’s success and vilified the opposition. Thus, the narrative on which his entire campaign ran on was that the opposition stymied the country’s glory days and that Filipinos only need to unite to continue enjoying what his father started. In many ways, therefore, installing Marcos to the presidency is a means to restoring the family’s name and image in Philippine history. Restoration is one thing, but effective governance requires a careful balancing act to navigate geopolitical challenges. While there are nascent indicators, the new Marcos administration has yet to demonstrate a clear strategy for dealing with great power competition.

A major factor in the Philippines’ security outlook is the US-China competition. Members of the Philippine strategic community are cognisant of the implications of the rivalry, which is an especially sticky situation because the Philippines has a longstanding alliance with the US and is economically dependent on China. A complicating factor that overshadows the Philippines’ outlook

is the South China Sea issue. Instead of leveraging the 2016 arbitration award in favour of the Philippines, former President Rodrigo Duterte’s “independent foreign policy” entailed a pivot towards China and away from the US. Closer ties to China meant lowering the tensions in the South China Sea, gaining support for the war on drugs, and receiving investment pledges that fuelled the administration’s flagship Build, Build, Build program. The costs of this foreign policy, however, were too great. For one, investment pledges did not translate to infrastructure projects. Further collateral damage involved the alliance with the US when Duterte initiated the abrogation of the Visiting Forces Agreement. The VFA—and the alliance—has since been restored but downplaying the arbitration award also meant that discussions on the South China Sea were marginalised during the Philippines’ ASEAN chairmanship in 2017, maritime incidents involving Chinese militia and Filipino fishermen were understated, and the patrols and presence of the Armed Forces of the Philippines and



5 August 2022. Puerto Princesa, Philippines. Military officers from Australia, the United States, the United Kingdom and the Philippines at the opening ceremony of Exercise Pacific Partnership.

“the new Marcos administration has yet to demonstrate a clear strategy for dealing with great power competition”

the Philippine Coast Guard in the West Philippine Sea were severely constrained.

In contrast to Duterte, Marcos seems more inclined to put the South China Sea front and centre. In his first State of the Nation Address in June 2022, he put his foot down about “not giving up an inch” of Philippine territory to any foreign power. The strong stance stood out in a positive way. At the same time, however, it obscured the concrete steps that are necessary to achieve that objective. He made no mention of the 2016 arbitration award, and neither did he indicate the platforms that the Philippines could use to leverage the award. The devil is in the details, and the lack thereof stand out in Marcos’ foreign policy. This notwithstanding, Marcos reiterated maritime security in the ASEAN Summits and related meetings in Cambodia in November 2022. The frame he used at the ASEAN-US Summit was transnational crime and the need to enhance maritime cooperation to combat illegal, unregulated and unreported fishing, marine plastic debris, and marine pollution. At the ASEAN Plus Three Summit, meanwhile, he emphasised safety and freedom of navigation in accordance with international regimes like UNCLOS. In the days following the meetings in Phnom Penh, both China and the Philippines agreed to back the early conclusion of the Code of Conduct. The optics are



3 August 2022. Phnom Penh, Cambodia. 55th ASEAN Foreign Ministers’ Meeting. Credit: Hong Menea.

good, but the fact that the COC is a non-binding document (in contrast to the 2016 arbitration award) has the potential to negate whatever gains may result from it. Moreover, that China and the Philippines agreed to jumpstart the COC shortly before US Vice President Kamala Harris’ visit to the Philippines is quite telling about Marcos’ foreign policy as being “friends to all and enemy to none.” In short, the new Marcos administration’s policy in the South China Sea indicates a marked difference from Duterte, but an appeal to unity amongst neighbours falls short of a nuanced policy to protect and advance the Philippines’ national interest. Of course, the COC is a significant step in resolving the South China Sea issue, but the same fervour should be injected in the implementation of the arbitration award. By leveraging the award, the Philippines can demonstrate not only its resolve, but also its credibility as a responsible member of the international community.

A second factor in the Philippines’ security outlook is the Russia-Ukraine crisis. When the invasion took place in February 2022, Duterte was still sitting as president and his immediate response was to stay

neutral, arguing that it was not the Philippines’ battle and thus not taking sides would translate to the country not getting dragged into a war. Even though the Philippines eventually voted to support the UN resolution that condemned the invasion, Duterte’s neutrality was understandable, considering his plans early in his administration to acquire weapons from Russia, including aircraft and submarines. Similar to his approach to China, Duterte wanted to deepen the Philippines’ bilateral relationship with Russia, which took the form of an expansion of defence relations, including port calls, naval exercises, and arms sales. A memorandum of agreement was signed in 2017 that resulted in the exchange of Russian and Philippine defence attachés. The reinvigorated bilateral relationship with Russia, however, likewise did not bear fruit. The supposed submarine acquisition for the Armed Forces of the Philippines and the procurement of 17 Mi-17 heavy-lift helicopters were cancelled in light of the Ukraine crisis.

Marcos took on the presidency months into the invasion. By then, the inevitable impact of Russia’s actions on global supply chains



“the Philippines’ security outlook has China and Russia in sight, with the alliance with the United States on the side.”

began to be more palpable. To fulfill the modernisation program of the Philippine armed forces, Marcos managed to secure an alternative supply from the US to fill the cancelled Russian helicopter contract. However, with mounting pressure from the OPEC+ to cut oil production by 2 million barrels per day of output, Marcos announced that he might need to turn to Russia to fulfill the Philippines’ fuel requirements, this despite the rising number of states that have imposed sanctions on Russia. This move puts the Philippines in an untenable position because its stance on defending the rules-based international order should be consistent with its position against China in the West Philippine Sea. If the Philippines continues to vacillate from one decision to another, the country then becomes an unreliable member of the international community. To be fair, he does seem to portray the Philippines as an upstanding state: he says the right things at the right time and he does not go off-script, unlike his predecessor. In the recently concluded ASEAN meetings in Phnom Penh, he urged the peaceful resolution of the Russia-Ukraine crisis, expressed concern over North Korea’s missile launches, called for the speedy implementation of ASEAN’s Five-Point Consensus on Myanmar, and reiterated ASEAN centrality. For all intents and purposes, the

Philippines under Marcos fulfills the hope that his administration is not the continuation of Duterte’s. There are, of course, many differences, not least of which is the Philippines’ new emphasis on non-traditional security issues like climate change, renewable energy sources, and food security. These issues are precisely why the Philippines has a lot at stake in the latest G20 Summit in Bali. Seeking and transitioning to renewable energy sources will benefit the Philippines, especially as it imports most of its coal supply from Indonesia. Phasing out coal should be a priority for the Marcos administration, especially since the Philippines is a climate vulnerable country. The G20 Summit was also the platform for demanding the full delivery of climate finance obligations to avert or minimise loss and damage. This is an important part of climate justice that the Philippines has long recognised and to which Marcos should pay closer attention. If there is one thing that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has made clear, it is that the oil and gas can so easily be held hostage by errant states. High value should then be placed on the diversification of supply chains to minimise one’s dependence and vulnerability.

Despite some changes from the previous administration, many things remain the same. The Philippine economy, for instance, remains mired in debt. Largely due to borrowings during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Duterte administration left behind an outstanding debt of PhP12.79 trillion (roughly US\$223 billion). This is understandable, considering that the government’s revenue collection was severely impacted by tight restrictions during the pandemic that almost completely dampened economic activity. A month into Marcos’ presidency, Philippine debt reached a new record of PhP12.89 trillion (US\$224 billion) in July 2022 and to

PhP13.5 trillion (USD\$235 billion) in September 2022. The latest amount breached the Bureau of Treasury’s programmed obligations for the year, although the country’s debt-to-GDP ratio has slightly improved from the first quarter of 2022. This is also to be expected now that the economy continues to recover from the pandemic. The breach, however, not only means more debt repayment in the future, but also that the country will be more dependent on growth to repay its obligations. Higher taxes can be imposed to implement new sources of revenues but to make this sustainable, the Marcos administration’s economic team needs to ensure that the resulting growth rate should be higher than the interest rates of loans owed by the government. Additionally, the groundwork should have already been done to introduce new revenue sources, and to do this Marcos’ team needs to be as transparent as possible.

In sum, the Philippines’ security outlook has China and Russia in sight, with the alliance with the United States on the side. Driving this outlook are domestic considerations regarding the Philippines’ position in the South China Sea and the impacts of the disruption in global supply chains as a result of the Ukraine crisis. These domestic pressures can be seen in the way the Marcos administration takes pains to differentiate itself from the previous presidency of Duterte. Nevertheless, as the country remains deeply in debt and without a clear economic strategy, the Philippines’ ability to navigate the post-pandemic geopolitical environment will be severely challenged.

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## Singapore: US-China Strategic Competition and ASEAN's Regional Challenges

**Lawrence Anderson**

The regional security outlook in Asia is mixed. While COVID-19 appears to be finally under control, recovery in both the healthcare and economic sectors is uneven and fragile. Like the rest of the world, the Asia-Pacific continues to face having to deal with the risk of further pandemics, the climate crisis, food security problems, spiralling fuel costs and finance, to name just a few non-traditional security challenges threatening the regional order. They will be with us for years to come. Significantly, none can be resolved by any one country alone. Another major security concern is the deteriorating relationship between China and the United States. This will continue to have a significant impact on ASEAN and the potential role that ASEAN can play to promote stability and prosperity in the region.

### US-China Strategic Competition

The strategic competition between China and the US runs through the spine of the region's security challenges. Russia's war in the Ukraine might be uppermost in the minds of Europeans, but to us in Asia, worsening tensions in Sino-US relations is of paramount concern. In fact, this critical bilateral relationship is at its most daunting since *rapprochement* 50 years ago.

Recent developments by both sides have only accentuated that divide. The 12 October release of the Biden Administration's National Security Strategy, coupled with the earlier

passage of the Creating Helpful Incentives to Produce Semiconductors and Science Act of 2022 (CHIPS Act), have led many analysts to conclude that the US has moved from a policy of competition and containment to a concerted effort with its major allies to degrade China's capabilities to challenge America's global pre-eminence.

A significant component of this policy approach is the 'decoupling' of their respective economies. For now, the focus of decoupling is national security export controls, to deprive China of the high-end semiconductor component parts and the tools to manufacture those component parts to check Beijing's efforts to develop the requisite technology. Since global manufacture of the most advanced chips and the tools to make them are mostly by companies from South Korea, Taiwan and the Netherlands, the Biden Administration has been trying to persuade those respective governments to block China's access.

If the US succeeds, it will deal a massive blow to Beijing's efforts at building self-sufficiency in critical sectors of its domestic economy and

"have led many analysts to conclude that the US has moved ... to a concerted effort with its major allies to degrade China's capabilities to challenge America's global pre-eminence."

its ability to project its influence and military forces abroad. But it is a big if, since China is the biggest market of those company's advanced semiconductors and tools. Moreover, several of the concerned governments are irritated at what they see as unilateral US action to provoke China at their companies' expense.

China, for its part, has contributed to rising tensions. Most recently, President Xi Jinping's speech at the 20th Party Congress reiterated the



11 October 2022. Singapore. Defence chiefs of the Five Power Defence Arrangements meet at the Defence Chiefs' Conference. Credit: MINDEF.



28 October 2022. Singapore. Exercise SUMAN Protector, a Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) command post exercise at the Changi Command and Control Centre. Credit: MINDEF.

“While China and the US pay lip-service to the notion of ASEAN Centrality, both superpowers have taken the approach of trying to pull individual countries into their respective spheres...”

Communist Party’s commitment to self-sufficiency in high-tech semiconductors and other industries, as well as its pursuit of advanced dual use technologies, all of which have heightened global concerns over “decoupling”.

While sectors dealing with and related to national security will certainly be affected, the further question is how many more will be added if tensions between the US and China and their respective allies continue to worsen? While decoupling of the two superpowers’ economies can be expected to widen, it is unlikely to reach the sort of separation between rival capitalist and socialist economies that characterised the earlier Cold War era. Both the US

and China currently are tied to one globalised economic system. Despite China’s attempts at self-sufficiency and to diversify its trading partners, it remains highly dependent on EU, US, and markets in East Asia for growth and access to advanced technologies. The same could be said of those countries’ dependence on China’s purchases and access to its huge domestic market.

President Xi’s call at the Party Congress for faster military development and the defence of China’s interests abroad sparked allusions to the Taiwan issue and has done little to allay regional concerns. Xi’s economic, military, and foreign policy related pronouncements did not raise anything startlingly new

but coming at the same time as his being elected to a third five-year term as Party general secretary, has lent added significance to what he has said. This has led many to conclude that Xi is aiming to remain in power for life.

Furthermore, the decision to pack the inner circle of seven Standing Committee members with his close allies with the emphasis on loyalty rather than knowledge, experience, and competency in their relevant areas of responsibility has raised doubts whether Xi will receive or be open to hearing views contradictory or even slightly nuanced to his own.

## Allies of a Kind

An added dimension to the tensions between the rival superpowers is the increasing involvement of their regional allies. The US and China cannot accept the other as number one in Asia, but neither are major countries like India or Japan prepared to recognise China as number one in the region either. Most Asia-Pacific countries are wary of China and several have joined in US-led alliances directed against China, such as the Quad (India, Japan, Australia and the US) and AUKUS (Australia, United Kingdom and the US). China, on the other hand, has joined Russia in a partnership that “has no limits” which, notwithstanding China’s wariness in providing Russia with weapons and other assistance in its war in the Ukraine, is still an alliance in all but name.

On this aspect, Washington enjoys a distinct advantage over Beijing because even though US power might have diminished in relative terms to China, Washington can call on allies who command significant economic weight and materiel resources to supplement its own, including military power projection capabilities in the Asia-Pacific and beyond. The

US has over 60 security partnerships in all regions of the world, while China has only a scattering of security relationships with Djibouti, North Korea, and a few others.

Whereas China counts Russia and North Korea as its key allies in Asia, one must wonder whether both countries are more of a drag on Beijing’s resources than major assets. Indeed, China’s predicament emboldened the DPRK to launch “an unprecedented number” of cruise and ballistic missiles recently in protest against the resumption of US-South Korea naval exercises. Coupled with China’s hostile “wolf-warrior” diplomacy actions such as Beijing’s decision to launch missiles around the seas near Taiwan and Japan last July, as a response to House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan, has pushed Japan and South Korea towards better relations and for both to work more closely with the US to counter China. Significantly, these decisions taken by the governments of Japan and South Korea, have won increasing support amongst their respective domestic populace, who have been noticeably alarmed by the missile launches and deteriorating relationship between China and the US.

## A Lack of Strategic Trust

While most countries in the Asia-Pacific are wary of China and some have even joined in US alliances against China, no one is looking to contain or decouple entirely from the Chinese economy. Even major US allies like Japan, Australia, and South Korea are looking towards working with Beijing on issues of mutual concern. The underlying impediment to this is the lack of strategic trust between the two superpowers. This could not come at a worst time given the pressing need for both superpowers to show leadership, commitment, and a serious desire

to work together to address the non-traditional security issues and transboundary problems that affect all of us. These issues are familiar to everyone. What is pertinent to note is that these problems will persist for years, adding to the drain on each country’s financial and other resources as they seek to mitigate their effects.

## ASEAN Can Play a Role

ASEAN has a role to play in working with like-minded countries to bring stability and prosperity to the region. ASEAN has influence as a collective grouping of 10 member states with a population of 661 million with 60% under the age of 35, and a combined GDP of US\$3 trillion. Yet, ASEAN is no longer taken seriously as a strong, resilient, and united organisation. Its friends abroad ask: what has ASEAN achieved recently to resolve its internal difficulties or deal with regional problems?

While China and the US pay lip-service to the notion of ASEAN Centrality, both superpowers have taken the approach of trying to pull individual countries into their respective spheres, thereby dividing and weakening ASEAN further. ASEAN needs to seriously get its house in order. What is needed is a mindset change and concerted effort to undertake meaningful reforms that would enable ASEAN to do what it has done in the past with reasonable success, namely, persuading the external powers to uphold the inclusive and rules-based multilateral system.

## What ASEAN Needs To Do

First, ASEAN countries must decide what they are prepared to do together as well as what they are not prepared to do with the big powers. Then, communicate this clearly to the major powers active in the region. It need not entail

forging an ASEAN consensus on all issues. But it does mean agreeing on areas where ASEAN member states must stand firmly together despite intense outside pressure to do things unilaterally.

In the past ASEAN was able to achieve significant outcomes by taking positions based on the collective good of all its members and resisting the urge to resort always to positions based solely on the respective national interests. To be a credible and respected organisation ASEAN must take a strong stand to uphold the principles enshrined in the UN Charter, ASEAN Charter, and the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. They include respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity and the rule of law, the non-use of force to settle conflicts, and respect for non-interference in the internal affairs of all nations. ASEAN should work closely with its Dialogue Partners to affirm, defend, and abide by those principles.

Second, ASEAN manages the relevant regional security mechanisms and platforms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) Plus and the East Asia Summit (EAS) to enable their leaders, and Foreign and Defence Ministers to meet with their counterparts from and beyond the region to share candid views on relevant issues and challenges. More importantly these ASEAN processes provide the cover for quarrelling countries to meet bilaterally in private or to allow regional states to provide alternative perspectives to what the leaders of the two superpowers might be receiving from their advisers.

Third, ASEAN must show it has the collective will to deal decisively with difficult thorny intra-ASEAN issues, chief of which is Myanmar. Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has

described it as a tragic situation in his elaboration of the problem. There needs to be political reconciliation and negotiations between all parties in good faith. Sadly, that trust—as is the case between the two superpowers—is lacking in Myanmar. As Singapore's Foreign Minister Dr. Vivian Balakrishnan has said, “this is an internal Myanmar matter and ASEAN was never set out to interfere in internal matters...What we can do is to encourage, to cajole, to facilitate and our (ASEAN) Special Envoy will do his best to try to bring the parties to at least talk to each other across the table in good faith.”

November 2022 has seen a surfeit of Summits—ASEAN, EAS, APEC and G20—which afforded opportunities for the leaders of ASEAN and the big powers to meet both collectively and bilaterally in private to address their differences and to try to work out acceptable compromises. Faced with the current trajectory in regional developments, however, it is unlikely that we will witness an upturn in China-US relations to reach a new understanding on Taiwan and other core differences. But the prospect of war breaking out between the US and China or between their respective allies and proxies seems remote. Accidents might happen, of course, but the US and China will have compelling instincts to contain them.

For ASEAN, this implies having to endure further stretches of anxiety and deliberations over building ASEAN resilience or settling of the Myanmar crisis. Tensions over traditional and non-traditional security threats will ensure that the region's best efforts to build stability, peace and a sense of predictability will continue to be mixed and fraught with uncertainty.

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## Vietnam: Southeast Asia amid Great Power Competition - No-Binary Choice is a Choice

Trần Chí Trung &  
Nguyễn Phương Hồng Ngọc

In 2022, the COVID-19 pandemic has been slowly receding into the background of the Indo-Pacific landscape while geopolitical tensions keep rising to the forefront. The Sino-US great power competition is manifesting in multiple domains, including security-economic alignments with respective like-minded partners, enforcement of rules and standards, as well as active promotion of opposing visions for regional order. “Competition” instead of “cooperation”, “polarisation” instead of “globalisation”, and “decoupling” instead of “integration”, become the watchwords of the regional outlook going forward.

ASEAN—as the regional grouping of Southeast Asia and the hub of diplomacy in the wider region—is confronting a much more fraught and uncertain strategic environment.

The way forward is treacherous but ASEAN member states are not helpless pawns on the major powers’ chessboard. There are opportunities amidst challenges for them to step up their active diplomacy, secure their interests, and make their voices heard.

### Strategic Alignments and Coalition-Building in the Indo-Pacific

Locked in a long-term strategic competition, the US and China have sought to galvanise and mobilise regional and international support for their competing initiatives and alignments. Each power is trying to prove itself the more reliable partner in delivering economic prosperity and security assurance for the Indo-Pacific.

“ASEAN ... is confronting a much more fraught and uncertain strategic environment.”

The US has certain advantages in the security domain given its extensive network of allies and partners in the region. In the past couple of years, Washington has solidified its regional security presence with the consolidation of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and the Australia-UK-US (AUKUS) trilateral security pact. Apart from its institutionalisation at the Leaders level, the Quad is promoting results-oriented cooperation through initiatives such as the Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) and a new Quad Climate Change Adaptation and Mitigation Package. In 2022, the US also joined the UK, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand in launching the Partners in the Blue Pacific initiative (PBP)



3 June 2022. Cambodia. Deputy Defence Minister Sen. Lt. Gen. Hoàng Xuân Chiển, 19th ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) Security Policy Conference. Credit: People’s Army newspaper.

to counterbalance China's growing footprint in the Pacific Islands.

The US Indo-Pacific strategy, however, has been rather deficient in its economic dimension. The world's largest economy has been absent from all multilateral free trade agreements and the prospect of America's comeback to the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) is elusive. To fill this gap, the Biden administration has launched the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) with Asian partners, including Vietnam and six other ASEAN countries, and the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII) under the G-7 ambit. However, the IPEF content still remains very vague and subject to negotiations among all parties concerned. The fact that it does not foreshadow improved access to US markets is seen as a critical drawback.

China, meanwhile, continues to maintain its status as the dominant economic powerhouse with its application to join the CPTPP and through championing the implementation of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which entered into force in January this year. Yet the security domain is where Beijing still lags behind Washington. To redeem that fact, China has introduced its latest instrument for global governance with the launch of the Global Security Initiative (GSI) and Global Development Initiative (GDI). In the Political Report of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, the importance of addressing security challenges has been elevated, demonstrating Beijing's grim outlook on the international environment in the coming years.

If the IPEF is an effort to provide economic ballast that remains lacking in the US Indo-Pacific strategy, the GSI is an endeavour to promote China as a credible security actor. The GSI aims to offer "Chinese wisdom" and "Chinese solutions to cope with international security challenges", bolster China's role as a security provider and enhance its strategic footprint in the Indo-Pacific. The GSI also challenges American military presence and alliances in the Indo-Pacific by explicitly invoking for the first time the notion of "indivisible security" which opposes "the building of national security on the insecurity of other countries".

Perhaps the most disruptive factor of 2022 is the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. This crisis has accelerated the momentum of Washington enlisting European powers into its Indo-Pacific strategy, building an arc of strategic synergies from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Concerned by the growing Russia-China convergence and shocked by the conflict in Ukraine, Europe has found solace in the US and by contrast adopted a more distant and colder stance toward China, which has helped to enhance the continent's engagement in the Indo-Pacific as a means of deterrence. As a coalition, the EU and NATO may be inclined to refrain from collective engagement so as to avoid unwanted tensions. However, certain individual members have increased their participation in developmental issues and even military deployments to leverage their own influence in the Indo-Pacific. The UK, for example, is deeply involved in the creation of various US-led initiatives such as AUKUS and PBP.

Another important development to watch is the extension of Indo-Pacific rivalries deeper into the heartland of Asia. In a "westward expansion" of unilateral mechanisms, the US has launched the I2U2 Group together

"Countries that join initiatives led by one power will inevitably face coercion, criticism and even veiled intimidation from the other."

with West Asian and Middle Eastern countries such as India, Israel, and the United Arab Emirates. According to US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan, this mechanism is intended to serve as "a feature of the broader region", which will "strengthen Quad and the US position in the Indo-Pacific region altogether". I2U2, dubbed as the "West Asia Quad", is speculated to create a transregional connection for the US to address its apparent "power vacuum" in the Middle East and better counter China and Russia's growing influence in both sub-regions.

China is also strengthening its own transregional bloc through the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and increasing its cooperation with Russia. As Moscow becomes more and more isolated by and from the West, it has shown a clear inclination to further connect with its Asian partners on the multilateral front and strengthen its capacity to counter Western sanctions.

## Emerging Strategic Trends in the Indo-Pacific

One of the most profound trends of strategic alignment in the Indo-Pacific is unilateralism. These unilateral groupings—such as the Quad and AUKUS—bring together an exclusive and small number of like-minded partners who rally

around a convergence of strategic and/or functional interests. They avoid the institutionalist approach of broad-based multilateralism, choosing to stay flexible and ad hoc in their coordination and cooperation, focusing on certain niche areas. Issue-based coalitions promise more pragmatic benefits and concrete results in a more time and resource efficient manner, which stands in contrast with the slow-motion consensus-building that characterises larger multilateral institutions.

To a certain extent, these groupings can strengthen strategic trust and deepen collaboration within their small membership. Yet, minilateral groupings can also broaden rifts and diminish possibilities for cooperation among great powers. The creation of mutually exclusive power blocs is often deliberately interpreted as hostile entities aiming to isolate rivals, based on the logic of balance of power rather than mutual cooperation. The surge of new coalitions has also

resulted in overlaps of purposes and implementation among various initiatives.

Meanwhile, existing multilateral mechanisms are left looking stagnant, ineffective, and unresponsive to the changing strategic landscape. This situation is somewhat akin to a vicious circle, in which slow reforms and the perceived ineffectiveness of traditional multilateral institutions have incentivised the creation of more minilateral and issue-based groupings, and vice versa.

Another notable trend is the securitisation and politicisation of developmental and economic issues, which has become the growing focus of the great power competition for influence. The US-China process of “decoupling”, cleansing critical supply chains of exposure to the other side and the weaponization of economic and technological leverage is gathering momentum. In 2022, the Biden administration has intensified its “chip war” against China by imposing comprehensive restrictions

on Chinese access to advanced semi-conductor technologies. Singapore’s Senior Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam recently warned that “a world where China and the US are decoupled in trade, in investments, data, payments, financial systems, intellectual property creation [...] would be a profoundly dangerous world.”

As great power tensions build up and the pressure to take sides increases, small and middle powers have increasingly invoked “strategic autonomy” as both a principle and an objective. Strategic autonomy reflects a country’s freedom to choose partners and cooperation mechanisms—that may include competing initiatives led by different rival powers. It also represents a country’s ability to make its own decision and present forthright opinions on regional and international issues in accordance with its national interests. India, Indonesia, and Singapore are often cited as notably successful examples in consistently exercising strategic



19 August 2022. Chandimandir, India. Vietnam-India Bilateral Army Exercise. Credit: Press Information Bureau / Indian Ministry of Defence.



autonomy. However, it is worth noting that strategic autonomy can only be established upon various prerequisites and require precise conditions, such as critical geographic locations, concrete foundations for economic stability, specific history and culture that allow for self-sustaining independence, among many others.

## Implications for ASEAN and Southeast Asian countries

These are testing times for ASEAN-styled multilateralism and its desired centrality in the regional architecture. Traditionally acclaimed as the hub of multilateral diplomacy in Southeast Asia and the wider region, ASEAN-led mechanisms are now facing the risk of being side-lined, overlooked, and even deemed irrelevant. Regional policymakers have been focused more on the tensions—rather than synergies—between existing ASEAN-led mechanisms and emerging major powers-led minilateral initiatives. The penchant for issue-based alignments also runs the risk of deepening pre-existing fragmentations among the ten ASEAN members as they do not share the same interests and priorities, not to mention possibly conflicting interests and even irreconcilable differences.

In addition, ASEAN-led mechanisms could be overshadowed by great powers. This has arguably been the case with RCEP where ASEAN played a pivotal role but China, with by far the largest economy, has tended to receive much of the praise. Other ASEAN mechanisms—especially the East Asia Summit—also risk becoming arenas for great powers to criticise and accuse each other instead of building dialogues.

ASEAN and its individual member states will continue to be subjected to greater pressure to endorse multiple initiatives launched by the US and China. As the line between

multilateralism, minilateralism and bilateralism is often deliberately blurred by the great powers, Southeast Asia is also prone to more bilateral persuasion. Countries that join initiatives led by one power will inevitably face coercion, criticism, and even veiled intimidation from the other.

Still, there are opportunities amidst challenges, provided that Southeast Asian governments can adjust and adapt in a timely fashion. Informal initiatives without formal institutionalisation allow for selective and pragmatic responses in terms of principles, which allows Southeast Asia to participate in competing mechanisms and appease rival powers, without subscribing to their exclusive visions of the regional order. For example, both the IPEF and GSI remain broad initiatives consisting of general visions for the common interest. Whether and how far Southeast Asia countries would contribute to these frameworks would depend on further substantive assessments and negotiations. However, institutionalisation of major powers-led initiatives should be anticipated in the near future. In that case, the intrinsic nature of issue-specific alignments may provide leeway for Southeast Asia to appease great powers by explaining their choices based on national interests in a particular domain.

Besides, there are novel opportunities for small and middle countries to initiate various minilateral and issue-based platforms that are less sensitive, such as the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative (SCRI) between India, Japan, and Australia or the Digital Economy Partnership Agreement (DEPA) between Chile, New Zealand, and Singapore. These platforms offer a more affirmative and positive agenda for regional cooperation and can scale up to be more inclusive in the long run.

ASEAN and its member states are prioritising post-pandemic economic recovery and mitigation of difficulties arising from the Russia-Ukraine conflict. The mostly-developing Southeast Asia is more interested in what pragmatic benefits the US, China, and other major powers can offer, rather than the question of whose governance model is more attractive or should prevail over another.

As Singapore's veteran diplomat Kausikan Bilahari suggested, regional states should assert their agency to pursue their own national interests and refuse to see things in binary terms: ASEAN and Southeast Asia must continue to nurture their unique position and close proximity to both China and the US, as strong relations with Washington are not mutually exclusive to close relations with Beijing but rather, a necessary condition for such ties.

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## New Zealand: “It’s Grim Out There”

**Mark G. Rolls**

The above phrase appeared in Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern’s foreign policy speech to the Lowy Institute in July during her visit to Australia. Not noted for her pessimism, she drew attention to how the international situation was becoming ‘increasingly difficult’ due to the war in Ukraine, a more contested environment in the Pacific, the effects of COVID-19 and, in keeping with one of her central concerns, climate change. There are few in the foreign and security policy community who would disagree with this even if the adjective chosen might differ. The more contested Pacific environment goes right to the heart of what has again been a central concern, namely, which side of the dividing line is New Zealand on amidst ever increasing Sino-US competition.

That New Zealand’s strategic environment is more challenging had already been made apparent in December’s Defence Assessment 2021 (DA21): the first official update on New Zealand’s overall security outlook since 2018. DA21 recognised that the environment was now “substantially more challenging and complex ... than it has [been] for decades” and that whilst the country still does not face a direct military threat, “the prospect of major armed conflict in the Indo-Pacific is less remote than it has been.”

Of the two principal challenges identified—strategic competition and climate change—the former is seen as being inextricably linked to the rise of China and the latter’s effects as being felt soonest in the Pacific: New Zealand’s ‘immediate neighbourhood’. The Pacific also featured in an announcement by the Minister of



25 January 2022. Pacific Ocean. USS *Sampson* (DDG 102), right, conducts a replenishment-at-sea with the New Zealand navy oiler HMNZS *Aotearoa* (A11) as they support disaster relief efforts in Tonga. Credit: US Navy Naval Aircrewmen Second Class John Allen.

Defence, Peeni Henare, of a new set of Defence Priorities and Principles. Having hitherto maintained a low profile, the Minister was more prominent in 2022. Notably, he visited Fiji in March to agree a Statement of Intent on greater bilateral defence cooperation and attended the Shangri-La Dialogue in June. Henare’s visit to Suva was followed soon thereafter by Foreign Minister Nanaia Mahuta’s to sign the Duavata Partnership on increased strategic cooperation.

Wellington’s concerns about its security interests in the Pacific being affected by the return of strategic competition were not explicitly linked to China’s intention to pursue increased military cooperation there: DA21 also noted increased engagement and presence by other states. Developments in the region which could threaten New Zealand’s defence and security interests, however, included the “establishment of a military base or dual-use facility ... by a state that does not share New Zealand’s values and security interests”. The conclusion reached by most observers was that this implicitly meant China. Indeed,

“...which side of the dividing line is New Zealand on amidst ever increasing Sino-US competition.”

almost identical wording appeared in the US-Aotearoa New Zealand Joint Statement released during Ardern’s visit to the US in June.

China was not the only challenger (New Zealand avoids the term revisionist) to the international rules-based order identified in DA21. Russia was singled out for acting in a number of ways invidious to it including its earlier use of force in Ukraine in 2014. No one at the time of the assessment’s publication could have envisaged how the scale of the Russian challenge would expand so dramatically or that it would have such an impact on New Zealand’s foreign and security policy and New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF) activities.



31 July 2022. The Chief of the New Zealand Defence Force Air Marshal Kevin Short welcomes Admiral John C. Aquilino Commander US Indo-Pacific Command. Credit: US Indo-Pacific Command / Flickr.

In February, New Zealand reacted quickly to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Ardern and Mahuta condemned it and called on Russia to cease its military operations and withdraw immediately. New Zealand joined in sanctioning a significant number of key individuals and entities in the Russian government and, while NZDF personnel could not enter Ukraine, it allowed its direct support to trend upward from assistance with intelligence and air transport to the provision of funding for lethal equipment and training in its use.

The Ukraine situation saw Mahuta participate virtually in a NATO and NATO Partner Foreign Ministers' Meeting in April: New Zealand being one of the alliance's Asia-Pacific

partners. At this, she stated that New Zealand stood in solidarity with Ukraine, NATO, and its partners in the face of Putin's "brutal and illegal invasion".

China's persistent failure to condemn the invasion, to uphold its UN Charter obligations, and to act as a responsible member of the UN Security Council (UNSC), has been an additional source of friction in what has long been one of New Zealand's most important bilateral relationships.

At the annual New Zealand – China Foreign Affairs Consultations in March the Secretary of Foreign Affairs and Trade had only "encouraged China to use its access and influence [with Russia] as part of a strong and unified international

response". By June, however, when Mahuta met virtually with China's State Councillor and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Wang Yi, she was urging China to use this access and influence and noting "China's responsibility as a permanent member" of the Security Council. When she met him in person on the side-lines of ASEAN meetings in Phnom Penh in August she went further urging "China to be clear, in line with its commitment to the UN Charter, that it does not support Russia's unlawful aggression".

New Zealand's dissatisfaction with the workings of the UNSC in response to Russia's invasion was later made abundantly clear in Ardern's address to the UN General Assembly in September.

In this, she contended that “when we most needed the ... Council to act in defence of international peace and security, it could not. It did not fulfil its mandate because of one permanent member [i.e. Russia] who was willing to abuse its privileged position”. For Ardern, this highlights why New Zealand champions the Veto Initiative and supports the abolition of the veto itself.

In her June meeting with Wang Yi, Mahuta had also expressed New Zealand’s views on sensitive issues including the human rights situation in Xinjiang, the reduction in freedoms and rights in Hong Kong, and the need to maintain peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. To these issues the Pacific was now added. After acknowledging China’s long presence there, she underscored the “importance of engagement taking place in a manner that advances Pacific priorities, [and] is supportive of ... regional institutions such as the Pacific Islands Forum”. Wellington had undoubtedly been alarmed by the April agreement with the Solomon Islands and Beijing’s subsequent failed efforts to establish a Pacific-wide agreement.

Sensitivities and differences regarding the China relationship were apparent too in Ardern’s address to the annual China Business Summit in August. Here she repeated the familiar refrain that New Zealand will “advocate for approaches and outcomes that reflect [its] ... interests and values, and speak out on issues that do not” as part of its “fiercely independent foreign policy”.

Ardern had earlier told the NATO Summit in Madrid that China has “become more assertive and more willing to challenge international rules and norms” drawing a sharp rebuke from China’s embassy in Wellington and the observation that such remarks were “not helpful for developing mutual trust”. Moreover,

in a telling comment in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade’s statement on Mahuta’s August meeting with Wang Yi, it was noted that she had drawn attention to “the need to look beyond the ‘firsts’ to a mature relationship that respects New Zealand’s independent foreign policy”.

Adding to the sense of a significant shift in New Zealand’s relations with China was the growing alignment between Wellington and Washington. This had been signalled in the Biden administration’s Indo-Pacific Strategy, where New Zealand was noted as an important partner, and was made more apparent by the aforementioned Ardern visit and joint statement along with a succession of high-level visits from senior Biden officials. These included the head of the US Indo-Pacific Command, Admiral John Aquilino, and the US Deputy Secretary of State, Wendy Sherman

Besides reaffirming the strategic partnership expressed in the 2010 Wellington and 2012 Washington declarations, and shared concerns about China’s moves in the Pacific, the June joint statement clearly noted both countries’ opposition to “unlawful maritime claims and activities” in the South China Sea and their “grave concerns” about the violation of human rights in Xinjiang and the eroding of people’s rights and freedoms in Hong Kong. Predictably, China’s Foreign Ministry said the joint statement had smeared China and interfered in its internal affairs.

The US – New Zealand statement also recognised that defence and security will become “an ever more important focus” of the partnership with both states looking to increase force interoperability. New Zealand’s acquisition of new capabilities will also create “opportunities for combined operations” and extended cooperation.

“That there has been a perceptible shift has led some to argue that New Zealand needs to be careful not to be too pro-Western in its foreign policy.”

The P-8A Poseidon aircraft is undoubtedly most suited to be at the centre of expanded defence cooperation. Indeed, in comments made at the keeling ceremony for one of the RNZAF’s four P-8s, New Zealand’s ambassador to the US noted how they will “better equip” New Zealand’s defence forces to “extend their reach into the Pacific and beyond working with ... partners and friends”. The first plane is scheduled to arrive in New Zealand in December with the remaining three by April 2023.

Other acquisitions currently under way for the NZDF as part of the Defence Capability Plan 2019 (DCP19) include five C-130J-30 aircraft and 43 Bushmaster Protected Mobility Vehicles. The fiscal constraints resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic had led to discussions about whether or not a new plan would be issued, but the Defence Minister has said that there would be no new plan under the Labour Government. Instead, planned projects such as the Southern Ocean Patrol Vessel have been deferred.

A decision which cannot be deferred much longer, for many analysts, is on the replacement of the Royal New Zealand Navy’s (RNZN) ANZAC frigates. According to DCP 2019, these are to be replaced by the mid-2030s.

Both HMNZS Te Kaha and her sister ship Te Mana have now returned to New Zealand after completing three-year Frigate Systems Upgrades in Canada, but this will only extend their operational lives until 2035.

Concerns about the NZDF's operational capability have been raised not just by procurement decisions deferred, but also by the effects of the country's COVID-19 response on the training and retention of defence personnel. Operation Protect, which began in August 2020 and only officially ended in May, witnessed one of the largest ever deployments of NZDF personnel in New Zealand. Less than a year into the operation, the Chief of Defence Force had reported to the Minister his concerns that the NZDF's capacity to respond to a large-scale natural disaster would "remain degraded for the foreseeable future" and that there would be a "skill fade of core military competencies with the reduction in usual military activities". Analysis of the reasons why some 1500 personnel left the NZDF between February 2020 and January 2022 revealed that over a third of personnel from all three services cited their participation in the COVID-19 response as their main reason for so doing.

Operation Protect and the closed international border has also meant that participation in training exercises overseas was restricted. It was only in May that the New Zealand Army returned to training in the field with participation in the French Armed Forces New Caledonia multinational exercise. Thereafter, New Zealand has taken part in RIMPAC 22, Exercise Pitch Black in Australia, and Exercise Cartwheel in Fiji. The latter, a tactical field training exercise, was seen as an important part of the New Zealand Army's post-COVID-19 regeneration process.

COVID-19 constraints did not, however, prevent the NZDF from fulfilling one of its traditional roles in the Pacific: humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. The Hunga Tonga-Hunga Ha'apai eruption in January saw aircraft and ships deployed to provide aerial surveillance and deliver essential supplies including food and water. New Zealand's ongoing concerns about the impact of illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing on its Pacific Island neighbours' economies was displayed in its participation in the annual Operation Nasse fisheries policing operation as part of the Quadrilateral Defence Coordination Group.

If New Zealand had been moving at a different pace at the time of last year's Outlook then that is no longer the case. Both events and the expectations of its security partners—with regard to contributing to the war effort in Ukraine and countering China's influence in the Pacific—have necessitated that Wellington be seen to be keeping up. Although the impact of the pandemic on New Zealand's foreign and security policy will continue to fade away, the other issues considered will not and thus the outlook remains difficult to say the least.

An acknowledgement of this was apparent in Henare's announcement in July that the Government has commissioned a Defence Policy Review to be delivered by the end of 2022 with "future force design principles" in the first half of 2023. The idea that New Zealand's defence and security policy settings should be reviewed had been recommended in DA21 which recognised that the existing risk management approach no longer supported New Zealand's interests and that a more deliberate and proactive strategy was required.

It has also become increasingly untenable for New Zealand to keep side-stepping the thorny problem of the contradiction between the values it adheres to and those of a Chinese Communist Party-led China. Indeed, over the course of 2022, and notwithstanding Ardern's occasionally more conciliatory tone towards China, Wellington has been prepared to call Beijing out more often. In so doing, New Zealand has adopted a stance which is more in keeping with its traditional friends and partners Australia, the UK and the US; especially in the Pacific. That there has been a perceptible shift has led some to argue that New Zealand needs to be careful not to be too pro-Western in its foreign policy but there would be few who would favour aligning the country with a conception of international order determined in Moscow or Beijing.

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# Myanmar: A Coup with Long Tentacles

Jala Zlato  
(Not the authors real name)

At the beginning of 2021 while countries around the world were trying to come to terms with the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic had entrenched itself and would endure for an indeterminate period, people in Myanmar were stunned and overwhelmed by a military coup that they knew would overturn their lives. Even though there were rumours before the coup d'état, people in Myanmar did not believe it would come true. Nonetheless, when it actually came to them, Myanmar people faced the coup with spontaneous courage.

At the start, peaceful protests of Myanmar people received praise from the international community as they were creative and genuine. Especially, the inventive activist approach of leading generation Z, the young people of Myanmar (from teenage to late twenties), is different from their prior generations—X and Y—who have been taking a firm and rigid approach to resistance familiar since the first coup in 1962. During the first few weeks, Myanmar could catch international attention with innovative and colourful peaceful protests, including marches of couples in their wedding dress, artists in various costumes, dance troops, cartoonists with their protesting cartoon characters' banners, etc. Banging pots and pans at night around 8pm signified the country-wide civil outcry. When the military intensified the oppression against the protestors, people also changed the tactics to counteract it. A lot of young people went to ethnic armed areas



12 February 2022. Naypyidaw, Myanmar. 75th anniversary of Union Day. Credit: Stringer / AFP.

and joined ethnic armed groups to get training to fight against the military. Along with the growing number of resistance groups in addition to the ethnic armed organisations, the junta sought to intimidate through resorting to more atrocious tactics—shelling, abducting people and using them as human shields, raping, burning down villages, and murdering civilians.

Myanmar has been in turmoil and conflict for almost two years already and the side effects are gradually seeping out across the region. The escalating oppression by the junta and the increasing tensions between the military troops and resistance groups, is in fact generating a variety of consequences, some of them quite unexpected. The consequences can generally be categorised into three spheres – (1) domestic, (2) regional, and (3) international.

**Domestic:** The very negative consequence that the crisis provoked instantly was instabilities across the country. The country's crime rate rose markedly in the two-year period since the coup on 1 February 2021. The rule of law failed and the human rights situation began deteriorating along with heightened restrictions on freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. The state of heightened instability led to a precipitous

decline in the country's economy. Foreign investment and businesses are withdrawing from the country making thousands of people jobless. The economic hardship is pushing around 40 percent of Myanmar's total population of 55 million—roughly 22 million people—under poverty line. The education and healthcare sectors went upside down due to the military's targeted crackdown on healthcare workers and educators. Villages and schools also burnt down, and innocent civilians and children were killed under the accusation of assisting the People Defense Forces. Feeling unsafe, people left their homes behind and fled to the places they thought safe. As a result, the military's efforts to protect and consolidate the coup are affecting various regions in different ways.

**Regional:** The regional impacts have been severe. The immediate effect of the coup over the region is the ever-growing refugee crisis. Since the coup in February 2021, people have been fleeing their house to avoid the military atrocities and unjustified arrests. Many people are living in tents in the jungles. Others have fled to the refugee camps in the neighbouring countries. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, some 430,000 people have been internally

“...when it actually came to them, Myanmar people faced the coup with spontaneous courage.”

displaced since the coup. The Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP), a monitoring group, said that more than 2400 people have been killed by the military and 16,000 activists arrested by mid-November 2022. Other reports suggest that since the coup, the number of people crossing the Myanmar-Thai border to take refuge in the camps in Thailand reached 16,000 by December 2021. On the other hand, an estimated 22,000 refugees have entered India from Myanmar since February 2021, with an estimated 7,000 crossing into Manipur and Mizoram States in the second half of January 2022. These increased numbers are additional to the existing one million Rohingya refugees that have taken refuge in Bangladesh. Meanwhile, around 103,000 Rohingya in Malaysia and 20,000 in India remaining without legal status and at risk of deportation. These rising figures add to the millions of Myanmar migrants that have moved to other countries in the region seeking better economic opportunities but often with an irregular status in these new countries.

Due to the hardship stemming from the devastating economic situation in Myanmar people are also attempting to seek economic opportunities elsewhere to support their family. The urgency of survival is providing opportunities for human trafficking groups masquerading as employment agencies. The primary targets of these human-trafficking groups

are women and young girls. The brokers from the fake employment agencies usually approach women with job opportunities abroad and deceive with promises of good salary jobs in construction, agriculture, and factories in the neighbouring countries. Usually, women are trafficked to Thailand and China, but recently, the trafficking groups are extending the destinations as far as the Middle-East. Myanmar, in fact, is not the only country where human trafficking gangs operate. Special Economic Zones in Cambodia and Laos are notorious human trafficking hubs as well. However, the scale of the upheaval and instability and the sharp plunge in economic opportunities puts Myanmar at the centre of the scourge of human trafficking in the region.

Another critical issue that Myanmar's coup has aggravated and intensified is the illegal arms trade along the borders of Myanmar with Thailand, China, and India. In May 2021, Thai customs seized guns and ammunition in trucks attempting to cross into Myanmar at the Mae Sai border crossing. The guns seized were “welfare guns” bought under Thai police and army discount plans and leaked onto the black market. Thai border officials at Mae Sai also seized 100 grenades en route via courier to Tachileik in March 2021. As the fighting between the military and resistance groups gains pace, concerns are raised that the crisis in Myanmar would revive an arms black market in Thailand. Likewise, India is facing concerns that the intensifying Myanmar crisis is stimulating the illegal drug and arms trade in Mizoram State on the Myanmar-India border. A large cache of weapons including 29 AK-series and 7,894 assorted pieces of ammunition from two vehicles in Mizoram State was seized in 2020 by India's Border Security Force. Since that time, Mizoram, among the most peaceful of

“The people of Myanmar are expecting support from the world for a return toward the democracy that they enjoyed for a short period of time.”

Indian states, has been considered a new focal point for arms suppliers.

International: The chairman of the Myanmar-Burma Assistance Association once remarked that it was an open secret that the Chinese companies have been selling weapons to the Myanmar military regime for a long time. According to “Justice for Myanmar”, an advocacy group, Chinese state-owned enterprises are among the biggest suppliers of arms and military equipment to the Myanmar military. The chairman of Myanmar-Burma Assistance Association also said that China saw the whole of Myanmar as a security zone and considered that the stability of Myanmar directly impacted China's national interest and its security. Broader geopolitical factors were further intensifying the long and close relations between the two countries.

Since the coup on 1 February 2021, China has been supporting the Myanmar military in anticipation of a return to “business as usual”. China, alongside Russia, has long played the role of shielding the Myanmar military from international scrutiny. On 2 February 2021, China and Russia blocked a UN Security Council Statement condemning the military coup. Chinese state media characterised the coup in Myanmar as “a major cabinet reshuffle”. At the same time, Russia and Myanmar are

teaming up closely with frequent high-level exchanges and cooperation amid the sanctions from the West. The coup leader Min Aung Hlaing joined the Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok in September, met Putin, and signed an agreement to develop nuclear projects. In fact, Russia is also a major supplier of heavy weapons and arms to the Myanmar military, and reportedly eager to ramp up supplies to Myanmar to make up for the falling sales elsewhere in the region. During his last visit to Russia, the coup leader inspected the production of Russian-made SU-30 jet fighters that are set to be delivered to Myanmar army, and said he was willing to sign more arms deals and cooperate more with Russia in energy and defence. It seems that China and Russia are the Myanmar military's suppliers of last resort and critical to their survival.

China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi, recently told Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in a phone call that China would firmly support the Russian government to overcome difficulties, eliminate disturbances, and further establish Russia on the international stage. He also mentioned that China wanted to deepen exchanges with Russia at all levels. During the last Shanghai Cooperation Organization Summit, the organisation founded by China to offset western influence in Central Asia, held in Uzbekistan in September, Myanmar along with UAE, Kuwait, Maldives, and Bahrain were designated as dialogue partners of the SCO. As a reciprocal gesture of appreciation, the Myanmar military is boosting Chinese infrastructure projects under the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation arrangement and the China Myanmar Economic Corridor.

The growing friendship between Russia, China, and the Myanmar military is a further indication that the divisions in the world



27 March 2022. Naypyitaw, Myanmar. 77th Armed Forces Day. Credit: AP Photo / Aung Shine Oo.

order will become more profound in the future. The grouping of and provision of mutual support among like-minded countries is generally a good sign, something that points to understanding and solidarity. But sometimes appearances can be deceiving. In the case of Myanmar, shifting closer to Russia and China during this major domestic crisis can be expected to exacerbate divisions within ASEAN and beyond in the wider region.

Thus, the Myanmar crisis needs a determined and skilful response from the global community. Effective actions that can result in progress should be addressed. If the crisis endures, the close involvement of China and Russia alongside the Myanmar military could see it develop into a rift that divides greater East Asia as well as ASEAN. The crisis torched by Myanmar's military is actually already generating concerns in different spheres. The insulation provided by the close interest of China and Russia, can be expected to embolden Myanmar's military to resist compromise. The people of Myanmar are expecting

support from the world for a return toward the democracy that they enjoyed for a short period of time. Supporting Myanmar people means supporting their effort to restore democracy in the country as well as preventing the various forms of wider regional contagion associated with coup and its aftermath. ASEAN should also confirm its lead role in handling the Myanmar crisis by binding its Five Point Consensus with further effective actions designed to preclude future replays, whether in Myanmar or elsewhere. Delays in addressing the Myanmar crisis in a determined way will further complicate the region's security concerns.

**Jala Zlato**

*(Not the authors real name).*



## Cambodia's Security Challenges and Outlook For 2023

**Sovinda Po**

The year 2022 was marked as a challenging year for Cambodia. Cambodia has faced many issues such as the implementation of the COVID-19 pandemic recovery plan, the Myanmar Crisis, the Russo-Ukrainian war and the power rivalry between the US and China. For Cambodia, the major security concerns have been the Myanmar crisis and the Russo-Ukrainian war rather than the US-China competition.

The Myanmar crisis is a big concern for Cambodia, at least in the framework of ASEAN. So far Cambodia has devoted a lot of effort to solving the crisis, including by sending numerous top government officials and diplomats to Myanmar. For instance, in January 2022 Cambodia Prime Minister Hun Sen paid a visit to Myanmar to build confidence and trust with the military Junta. Next was Prak Sokhonn in his capacity as the ASEAN special envoy who paid two more visits to Myanmar to persuade the junta to reinstate the implementation of the five-point consensus. Nevertheless, Cambodia's effort to encourage the Myanmar military junta to follow the five-point consensus did not seem to be working as the military-led government continued to wage war against the other armed factions and to execute civilian activists. Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen referred to the Myanmar issue as a "hot stone" that is very difficult to deal with.

The issue is of concern for Cambodia for two reasons. Firstly, the inability to solve this crisis would adversely affect Cambodia's image



6 August 2022. Phnom Penh, Cambodia. 29th ASEAN Regional Forum. Credit: BAOQUOCTE.VN.

as the rotating ASEAN chair. Other countries in the region would perceive Cambodia as having to some extent wasted the opportunity it had to solve the crisis and give ASEAN's status a major boost. Some pundits and ASEAN member states have even gone so far as to accuse Cambodia of trying to accommodate the military junta.

Secondly, ASEAN centrality was a key issue on Cambodia's agenda. As the Chair, Cambodia's task was to unify all ASEAN member states, including Myanmar. However, there are conflicting ideas among ASEAN states on how to approach the crisis in Myanmar. Indonesia, for instance, has displayed disappointment regarding progress toward loosening the military's grip while Malaysia has encouraged ASEAN to engage unofficially with the National Unity Government (NUG), the shadow government of Myanmar. On the other hand, a number of ASEAN member states including Cambodia, Thailand, Lao, and Vietnam remain attached to the five-point consensus despite it being perceived as an ineffective approach toward resolving the crisis. Thus, Cambodia's chairmanship has been put to the test under the eyes of all ASEAN member states.

“Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen referred to the Myanmar issue as a “hot stone” that is very difficult to deal with.”

Another issue is the Russo-Ukrainian war. Although a distant issue for Cambodia as the chair of ASEAN, it still has great implications for Cambodia as an individual state. From Cambodia's perspective, it is a small state, with little military capability to defend itself from external interference into its domestic affairs, or outright invasion, by larger external powers. Such small states rely on international norms and laws to protect themselves. For instance, article 1 of the United Nations Charter states that “all members (of UN) shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purpose of the United Nations.”

Additionally, it further stated in article 6 of the UN charter that “A Member of the United Nations which has persistently violated the principles contained in the present charter may be expelled from the Organization by the General Assembly upon the recommendation of the Security Council.” Despite the rules prescribed in the UN charter, Russia still engaged in a military invasion of Ukraine. Not only was the UN unable to suspend its membership but the organisation failed to stop Russia’s military operation in Ukraine. The implication is clear that small states can no longer rely entirely on international laws and norms.

For these reasons, the Cambodian People’s Party (CPP)-led government, despite being a long-time friend of Russia, has expressed its support for Ukraine by sponsoring the UN resolutions condemning Russia’s military action. More fundamentally, Cambodia, as the current chair of ASEAN, also invited Ukraine to participate in the ASEAN Summit in Phnom Penh on 8-14 December. This gesture indicates that Cambodia is concerned about the integrity and effectiveness of the prevailing international law and norms. The fear in Cambodia is that the chances for Cambodia to be invaded in one way or another may not be as small as it would like.

Finally, there is the lesser security concern for Cambodia, the rivalry between the US and China. Cambodia has been a victim multiple times of competition and conflict among great powers, particularly during the cold war, that led to the loss of nearly 3 million Cambodians. Currently, the rivalry between the US and China has been a great challenge for Cambodia as the US has been putting pressure on Cambodia due to its close relations with China. Amidst the US-China trade war,

under the Trump administration, both Cambodian government officials and Chinese-owned companies that had invested in Cambodia were hit with painful sanctions. For instance, in 2020 the US sanctioned the Union Development Group (UDG) and Cambodia’s senior general Kun Kim under the Global Magnitsky Act for alleged human rights violations even though the main reason was the US’s attempt to counter China’s influence in Cambodia. Similarly, since 2019 until now, the US has repeatedly expressed its concern that China is seeking a military base in Cambodia. The US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman visited Cambodia in 2021 and urged Cambodia to be more transparent regarding the construction of new facilities and the upgrade of an existing base in Ream. During the ASEAN Summit in Phnom Penh, the US president Joe Biden also urged Cambodia to be more transparent about the base. These US actions toward Cambodia indicate that Cambodia will receive more pressure as the US-China rivalry becomes more intense. Though these concerns do not require immediate action from the Cambodian government, they represent a recurring and enduring irritant.

Looking into the future these issues affect Cambodia in different ways. Firstly, the Myanmar Crisis, despite being a major concern for Cambodia as ASEAN Chair, is a responsibility that now passes to Indonesia. Cambodia will, of course, have a continuing responsibility to protect ASEAN interests in all circumstances including whatever developments occur in Myanmar.

For example, at the 40th and 41st ASEAN Summits in Phnom Penh Cambodia had a chance to host world leaders and was able to discuss regional and international issues directly with the major powers.

“[Cambodia and Vietnam] agreed to strengthen cooperation in defence and security based on the principle of not allowing any hostile forces to use their respective territories to harm the other’s security.”

Nevertheless, if the Myanmar crisis cannot be resolved within the next two or three years it could affect ASEAN unity and its aspirations to centrality. This would have further implications for Cambodia insofar as it currently leverages ASEAN membership to advance its interests and to engage larger states with confidence.

Russia’s Ukraine war will continue to affect Cambodia, particularly as the ebb and flow of the conflict provokes changes in the intensity of the fighting, in tactics, and in the weaponry employed. Without any proper and effective response from international organisations, the war can be expected to have implication for Cambodia such as the disruption of supply chains and continuing inflationary pressures.

Finally, as US-China competition persists, Cambodia has two security concerns linked to this rivalry. Firstly, Cambodia is concerned that the US could use its economic power to limit Cambodia’s exports to the US market. Currently, the US is Cambodia’s largest export market. Secondly, Cambodia is aware of the risk that the competition will spill-over to the



5 August 2022. Phnom Penh, Cambodia. 12th East Asia Summit (EAS) Foreign Ministers' Meeting. Credit: ASEAN.

Southeast Asian region and force the countries in the region to take sides. If this were to happen, Cambodia could well be surrounded by US allies particularly Thailand and Vietnam. While Thailand has been quiet on Cambodia's close relations with China, Vietnam has appeared to be more concerned. Vietnam perceives China's engagement with Cambodia as a potentially threatening strategic move to encircle Vietnam. Previously, Vietnam signalled its concerns and sought assurances from Cambodia that Cambodia would never allow its territory to be used against Vietnam. In 2019, Vietnam released its Defence Paper warning of "interference" and "division" of its bilateral relations with Cambodia. In that same year, Cambodia and Vietnam signed an agreement to establish the basic principle for their bilateral relations that "the two sides agreed to strengthen cooperation in defence and security based on the principle of not allowing any hostile forces to use their respective territories to harm the other's security."

Nevertheless, Cambodia has less incentives to move away from China's orbit. The classic case is that in 2012, Cambodia prevented ASEAN from issuing a consensus statement on the

South China Sea issue. Cambodia's action really disappointed Vietnam. Though there were not any concrete responses from the Vietnamese government, the Vietnamese people expressed their outrage toward the Cambodian government via their comments on Hun Sen's Facebook page. Later on, Cambodia even moved closer to China following a series of actions that proved this point. In 2019, Cambodia demolished facilities funded by the US. In June 2021 Cambodia's Defence Minister Tea Banh revealed that China provides financial support to modernise the Ream base. In June 2022, Cambodia and China inaugurated a ground-breaking ceremony for the construction of a ship-maintenance facility in the Ream naval base.

The funding which is exclusively provided by China for the modernisation of the base raised concerns for Vietnam because Cambodia had previously rejected Vietnam's request to help refurbish the base. After Tea Banh publicised Chinese support in August 2022, Vietnam established a small militia in Kien Kiang province, adjacent to Cambodia's Kampot province. The militia was created for the purpose of intelligence and information

gathering. An interview with VOA, Mey Dina, chief of staff at the Ream Naval Base, revealed that Vietnam is concerned with Chinese involvement in Cambodia. He further added that "Vietnam and the US are lobbying each other to ensure that Cambodia gets nothing or that we cannot grow our naval forces." The security tension between Cambodia and Vietnam can be expected to deepen if the rivalry between the US and China becomes more intense.

In conclusion, the major security concerns for Cambodia are the Myanmar crisis and Russia's war on Ukraine. These issues, together with the US-China power competition will continue to dominate Cambodia's security agenda for many years to come.

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## Mongolia: Giants on Every Horizon

### Mendee Jargalsaikhan and Tsogtgerel Nyamtseren

After more than two years of struggle against the pandemic, Mongolians looked at 2022 in quite positive ways. All hoped that China would open up for trade, especially its commodity exports, Russia's trans-Mongolia gas pipeline (to China) project would start, and a new airport would attract more airlines and hopefully see Ulaanbaatar grow into a logistical hub linking Asia and Europe. But this optimism didn't last long. China continued its 'zero-COVID-19 policy' and kept the borders closed. Further, China's imports of Mongolian mineral and agricultural commodities didn't pick up in volume or price as Mongolian parliamentarians and government officials had hoped and expected (and used to support generous budgetary expenditure programs).

The other unhappy news was Russia's military invasion of Ukraine. This caused several challenges for

Mongolian political leaders. First, the war basically cut off Mongolia's trade with Eurasia and Europe. It created an additional burden as Mongolian companies couldn't get shipments from and through China. The outcome was a sharp rise in the prices of the most imported products, ranging from daily supplies to construction materials. Second, Mongolian political leaders feared the consequences of possible reductions in or interruption of Russian supplies of fuel and other critical materials such as explosives for coal mines and generators for the power plants for the winter months. The shortage of fuel or sudden price increases could readily trigger social frustration and mobilisation against the government. Another major challenge was how to deal with pro-Ukraine and pro-Russia demonstrations locally and find a way between the United States and Russia globally. Although Russia tends to be described by the current leadership generation as Mongolia's most important ally, Mongolia's economic and financial outlook is actually more closely tied to the Bretton Woods financial institutions and to the Chinese market. A further challenge was how to position Mongolia

“First, the (Ukraine) war basically cut off Mongolia's trade with Eurasia and Europe.”

between the Kremlin and the West. As the country struggles to repay its maturing bonds and loans in 2023 and avoid the threat of defaults stemming from overly politicised and inefficient government policies, Mongolia needs the IMF and ADB. In the shadow of the geopolitical closure of its two giant neighbours, Mongolia shows all the signs of stagflation (i.e., simultaneous slow growth, high unemployment, and strong inflation) alongside dollar reserves being rapidly depleted by insipid Chinese demand for Mongolian commodities and the activities of Russian and Mongolian currency speculators. Mongolia's options are narrow and unattractive: Russia may soon be economically broken, Beijing is neither disposed nor well-positioned to extend credit without strings attached, and third parties are having their economic energies distorted by geopolitical considerations (notably, Ukraine).

Faced with this complicated overarching setting, Mongolia has pursued active multilateral diplomacy while endeavouring to distance itself from the geopolitical competition between the West and its two powerful neighbours. In June 2022, Mongolia organised an international conference on strengthening the role of women peacekeepers under the UN Women, Peace, and Security initiative. The conference was attended by the UN Under-Secretary-General for Peace Operations Jean-Pierre Lacroix and 60 female peacekeepers from 30 countries, including the five permanent members of the



1 August 2022. Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. A joint military engineering exercise, 'Road-2022', between the Mongolian Armed Forces and the Japan Self-Defense Forces. Credit: Montsame.

“... a small state nestled between two powerful and expansionist great powers engaged in an intensifying geopolitical competition both with each other and, jointly, against the West.”

United Nations Security Council. Furthermore, also in June 2022, Mongolia hosted the first post-pandemic in-person international dialogue, the Ulaanbaatar Dialogue on Northeast Asian Security. In the past, this dialogue provided a platform in particular for delegates from the United States, Japan, South Korea and North Korea. This year, however, delegates from Kyrgyz Republic and Russia also participated.

Mongolia's neutrality stance and its reputation for promoting dialogue, saw a number of leaders of international organisations visit Mongolia. One such highlight was UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres's visit in August 2022 to support the country's efforts to institutionalise its Nuclear-Weapon-Free status. Back in 1992, following the withdrawal of the Soviet military, Mongolia declared its territory as a single state Nuclear-Weapon-Free-Zone (NWFZ) and joined the Non-Aligned Movement. These were independent foreign policy initiatives to strengthen the country's sovereignty, security, and international standing. Over the course of 2022, Mongolia elected to honour its commitments to organise military exercises with a range of partners:

Khan Quest with the US but also involving China's PLA as observers, and Selenge with Russia. Along with Indian and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation members, Mongolian military personnel participated in Russia's Vostok exercise in its Far East. This step attracted criticism domestically as well as from some of Mongolia's neighbours, especially Japan. Besides these multilateral diplomatic efforts, Mongolia also engaged in several bilateral initiatives. Mongolia and South Korea declared a strategic partnership. The Mongolian Prime Minister visited Singapore and Germany while the Speaker made an official visit to Turkey. At the same time, Mongolia welcomed Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, attended the Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok and maintained all its channels of communication with China. With respect to China, Mongolia pressed for the resumption of open trade in commodities whereas with Russia, the focus was the major new projects on hydropower and the trans-Mongolian gas pipeline and the stability of fuel supplies.

As a result of the war in Ukraine, Mongolia has become one of the gateways for Russian tourists to travel to third countries, for the supply of goods to isolated Russian provinces, and even to be a refuge for a limited number of draft dodgers. With regular flights to Tokyo, Seoul, Frankfurt, and Istanbul, Mongolia began to provide a proximate gateway for not only Russians, but also expats who were working in Russia. Mongolia increased its flights to Ulan-Ude, a Russian city in Siberia. Similarly, Mongolia has become a transit point for goods for Russian citizens in bordering regions. Interestingly, as the roads improved Russians and Tuvans - who live in Russian Altai and Tuva republics, prefer to drive 100-200 km to Mongolia rather than 800-1000km to other major Russian landlocked cities. Some 500 Russian citizens now travel to

Mongolia on a daily basis, mostly for shopping purposes. Once China opens its borders, the cross-border trade between China's Xinjiang Uyghur, Mongolia's western provinces, Russia's landlocked provinces, and Kazakhstan is expected to flourish. Although Mongolia and Kazakhstan don't share a border, over 90 thousand Mongolian Kazakhs live in Kazakhstan. Furthermore, Kazakhs in Mongolia, China, and Russia have retained and renewed strong cultural and social ties. Finally, in the two months after the Kremlin's declaration of a partial mobilisation on 21 September, some 10,000 eligible Russians sought refuge in Mongolia, most of them from ethnic minorities—Buryats, Khalmyks and Tuvans—that had been extensively deployed to Ukraine up to that point. Many of them use Mongolia as a transit route to other countries. For these Russians, it is fortunate to have the 30-day visa exempt policy in place since 2014. Mongolian authorities are exploring options on how to accommodate these new refugees while civil society organisations and a small number of Russian diaspora communities are seeking ways to facilitate their stay in Mongolia. The refugee issue has been the particularly controversial and complicated one because Mongolia is bordered by two populous nation-states. The most obvious concern is that difficulties in either China or Russia could lead to an influx of refugees large enough to devastate the country's economy and lead to social instability. As a result, Mongolia is not a signatory of the UN Refugee Convention. In the past, Mongolia has become one of the safe routes for North Korean refugees, but it has pursued very strict policies regarding asylum seekers from China.

There are three major considerations shaping the uncertainty that pervades Mongolia's security outlook. The foremost is the Ukraine War and worsening Russia - Western relations. This is not new since Russia's take-



6 September 2022. Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. India Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and Mongolian counterpart Saikhanbayar Gursed discuss defence cooperation. Credit: Twitter / @rajnathsingh.

over of Crimea, Mongolia has begun to feel pressures from both sides. This choice would be a nightmare for Mongolia since it's too vulnerable to pressure from Russia and too isolated for Western countries to rescue. Although we don't know how the Russia-Ukraine war will unfold in terms of scope, scale, and duration or how the overarching geopolitical contest between Russia and the US (plus partners) might play out, there are two prominent risks for Mongolia. The first risk is that, although Mongolia has long looked to Russia to contain China's power and influence, the Kremlin becomes increasingly attracted to and focused on reviving the Soviet-like sphere of influence, bullying its neighbours, including those in Eurasia and Central Asia as well as Mongolia. This potential risk triggers Mongolian memories of being controlled by the Kremlin and deprived of crafting its own foreign and domestic policy settings. The second risk would be a weak Russia, a Russia absorbed by its own political and socio-economic crises. This also raises concerns in Ulaanbaatar as the country would encounter China's rising power and influence and, in the absence of Russia, more readily slide into China's orbit. Both scenarios help explain the priority Mongolia attaches to its other neighbours and

to the wider international community. It seems likely that a number of other Central Asian states, especially, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and to a lesser degree North Korea have similar concerns regarding either an expansionist or weak Russia.

Another major consideration is the relationship between China and the United States. The US and China trade war or even attempts at economic decoupling will have some slight impacts on Mongolia's economy. However, their geopolitical competition as China flexes its muscles as a result of its economic wealth and great power ambition or need, and the US intensifies its containment strategy and strengthens its military capabilities through its existing "hub and spokes" architecture, as well as new elements such as the Indo-Pacific Strategy, QUAD, and AUKUS constitutes a more serious risk. Mongolia's inclusion in the Indo-Pacific Strategy would trigger more concern in Beijing even though it is unthinkable for Washington to provide Ulaanbaatar with credible security assurances. As with the geopolitical gamesmanship between the US and China, Mongolia could be easily seen as one of the geopolitical cards for some politicians and strategists in Washington DC because Mongolia's

location makes it a good indicator of how other central Asian states will react to developments among the major powers. In addition, there are two hotspots—the Taiwan Straits and the Korean Peninsula. Any conflict involving Taiwan could be expected to have devastating political and economic impacts on Mongolia while war on the Korean peninsula would endanger over 60 thousand Mongolian diaspora in South Korea and have multiple spillover effects on Mongolia since Mongolia is more closely integrated with the East Asian region than with Central Asia or Eurasia.

The last consideration is Mongolia's domestic stability. Although the country is considered a functioning democracy, its institutions are weak and vulnerable to populist politics, particularly as politicians and voters prepare for the 2024 parliamentary elections. Because of massive debts, inefficient economic policies, prevalent corruption, and the recent advent of stagflation, the country's economy is alarmingly weak. Unless political leaders agree to strengthen the rule of law and restrain populist politics the country could implode as the people lose patience and go out in the streets. Politicians already neglected the early warning on the debt front and have paid little heed to the worsening socioeconomic conditions. Weak institutions and a sombre economic outlook do not provide a favourable setting for a small state nestled between two powerful and expansionist great powers engaged in an intensifying geopolitical competition both with each other and, jointly, against the West.

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