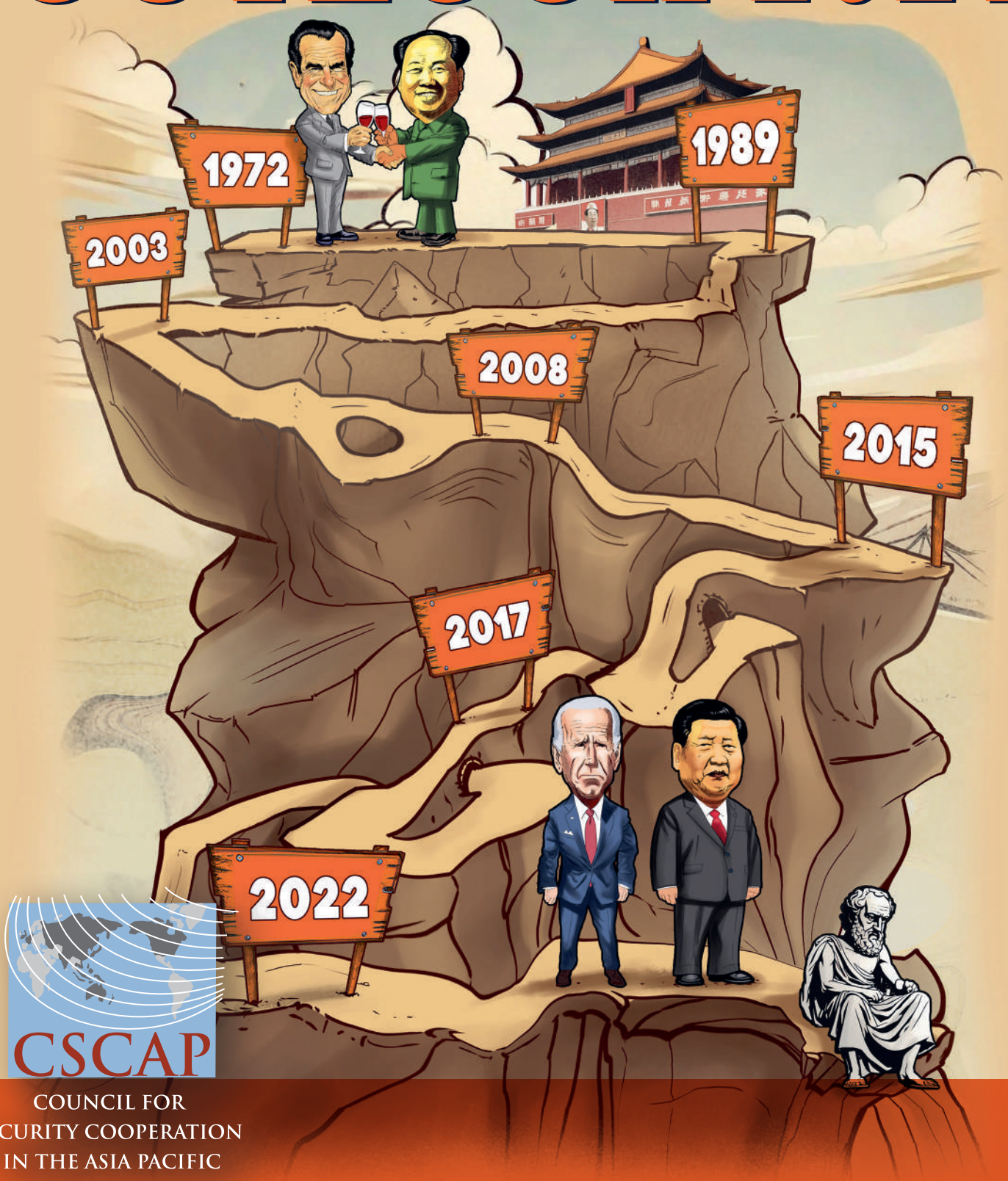


CSCAP

REGIONAL SECURITY

OUTLOOK 2024



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 image

Source: Rapprochement to intense competition.

Credit: Kathryn Brett and Ron Huiskens.

Artwork by Alejandro Palena.

Back cover image

Source: East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia.

Credit: Jan Huiskens.

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LETTER FROM THE CO-EDITORS

On behalf of CSCAP, we are pleased to present the CSCAP Regional Security Outlook (CRSO) 2024. Inaugurated in 2007, the CRSO volume is now in its eighteenth 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 2024 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 2024 do not necessarily reflect the views of the chapter authors.

Ron Huiskens and Kathryn Brett.

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Editor's Introduction: The State of the Indo-Pacific Calls for a Unified and Assertive ASEAN

Ron Huisken



15 November 2023. California, United States. Chinese President Xi Jinping and US President Joe Biden in the Filoli Estate. Credit: Xinhua.

The flow of events and developments is relentless. Creating an opportunity to pause, assess and decide what, if anything, needs to change is bold and therefore risky. Still, our region seems to be in urgent need of such a pause to consider other ways of proceeding and how to get to that alternative path.

The contemporary China-US relationship – effectively the relationship between the world's oldest and newest major powers – lies at the heart of our region's dilemma. This relationship can be said to date from the remarkable meeting between Richard Nixon and Mao Zedong in Shanghai in 1972. This meeting occurred over a decade after China's alliance relationship with the

Soviet Union had ruptured but only three years after infantry skirmishes between the former allies along the Azur river in 1969 almost spiralled into open war and, reportedly, with the US dampening Soviet overtures to support an attack on China's nascent nuclear forces. The US-China relationship, although not without occasional friction (especially over nuclear proliferation and Taiwan), had some depth and intimacy – like China hosting US intelligence and verification facilities directed at the USSR and the Reagan administration in the 1980s directing the Pentagon to plan to provide significant assistance to China in the event of Sino-Soviet conflict.

An enduring source of US optimism about relations with China was Deng Xiaoping's experiments with market economics from the late 1970s and the eventual adoption of the market system as a central component of 'Socialism with Chinese characteristics'. Washington's crude rule of thumb was that liberalism in the economic sphere would eventually seep into China's political culture, even if it ostensibly remained a socialist state. The events of June 1989 challenged this optimism and, while they did not overturn it, they could be said in retrospect to have pushed prospects for a deeper and more genuine partnership out of reach.

The first signs of a deeper movement in US confidence about a positive relationship with China came toward the end of the Clinton administration. During the Presidential election campaign in 2000, Al Gore and the Democrats continued to characterise China in the formerly bipartisan manner as a ‘partner’ while the Republicans behind George Bush now preferred ‘rival’ or ‘competitor’. In office, the Bush Administration prepared to respond to its view that the world’s centre of gravity was swinging away from the North Atlantic towards the North Pacific. Then came 9/11. The largest coalition of support the world had ever seen formed spontaneously around Washington but the Bush administration appeared not to notice, instead issuing an ultimatum – you are either with us or you are with the terrorists – and setting off on its course toward regime change in Iraq because it was deemed the most likely intersection point of Al-Qaeda thinking and access to WMD. Although 9/11 seemed to push everything else off the agenda, important changes consistent with an evolving international system and a more cautious attitude toward China continued in the background – such as switching homeports for additional core naval assets (aircraft carriers, ballistic missile submarines and hunter-killer submarines) from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

The new century brought a further crucial dimension to the China factor. It had become indisputably clear that China would over the foreseeable future acquire the economic weight and technological capabilities commensurate with those of a major power and, in fact, to grow further and eventually become the largest economy in the world. This heightened the impact of major US policy blunders like the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the global

“The US-China relationship, although not without occasional friction (especially over nuclear proliferation and Taiwan), had some depth and intimacy...”

financial crisis of 2007-8 because they diminished the US in quantitative and reputational terms and thereby sharpened the potential of the challenge from China.

In the years since the GFC in particular, we have witnessed a relentless intensification of tension and animosity in the US-China relationship, disturbingly sharp developments in the security postures of a number of states and a gathering propensity amongst prominent commentators around the region to speak openly about the risk of major power war. The depth of the disquiet in the region, building on cumulative difficulties on the trade front since the early 1990s such as the protection of intellectual property and persistent asymmetries in market access, can be inferred from the following more prominent developments:

- 2011: The Obama administration’s re-balance to Asia, intended more to reaffirm America’s commitment to its posture in Asia than to transform or strengthen that posture;
- 2014-15: China’s frantic construction of seven artificial islands in the South China Sea, perhaps to create a new reality and render impotent a possible adverse ruling by a UN arbitration tribunal on the validity of its ancient claim

to this sea. This development decisively transformed expectations of how turbulent and contested China’s rise could become;

- 2017: The Trump administration’s emphatic repositioning of China and Russia as revisionist powers seeking a world antithetical to US interests; the US stepped away from WTO practices in favour of an America First trade posture.
- 2017: Japan led a revival of the Quad (disbanded in 2008) and, in 2021, the group committed to annual meetings at the leaders level;
- 2020: Persistent, intensifying friction on the long India-China border in the Himalayan mountains flared into a major brawl between deployed troops in the Galwan valley, resulting in the first military deaths on this border for a number of decades.
- 2021: The US, UK and Australia announce the formation of AUKUS to oversee high-level security collaboration, most particularly the provision of nuclear-powered submarines and long-range cruise missiles to Australia;
- 2022 (January): China and Russia issue a statement that revives the concept of ‘indivisible security’ (one interpretation of which can see large states insist that smaller neighbours do not pursue divergent security policies) and which characterised the Sino-Russian partnership as ‘without limits’.
- 2022 (February): Russia invades Ukraine; US and EU resolve to support Ukraine ‘for as long as it takes’; China remains studiously neutral; Finland and Sweden, both traditionally neutral, immediately announce their intention to seek NATO membership as soon as possible;

“...for the foreseeable and, quite possibly, indefinite future the presence of two disproportionately powerful states embedded in the region has to be recognised and accepted as a reality.”

- 2022 (November): After decades of glacial change in its defence posture, Japan announced its intent to double the share of GDP for defence (1%-2%) in 5 years and acquire long-range cruise missiles from the US; ROK expresses deep concern about the nuclear threat from DPRK and seeks enhanced countervailing arrangements from the US under their alliance (while also alluding to the option of an independent nuclear capability);
- 2022: The persistent deterioration of the bilateral US-China relationship together with sharp asymmetries in the means of signalling resolve (basically varying the quantity and, especially, quality of official contact on the US side and leadership speeches plus conducting intimidating military activities on the China side) eroded confidence in the understandings concerning Taiwan, culminating in the August 2022 visit of the Speaker of the US House of Representatives followed by a strong and prolonged display of military belligerence by the PLAN and PLAAF.
- 2023: Despite persisting, deep-seated difficulties between Japan and South Korea, these two countries (each allied to the US) joined the US in a trilateral

partnership to, among other things, enhance military interoperability and share data on DPRK missile launches in real-time.

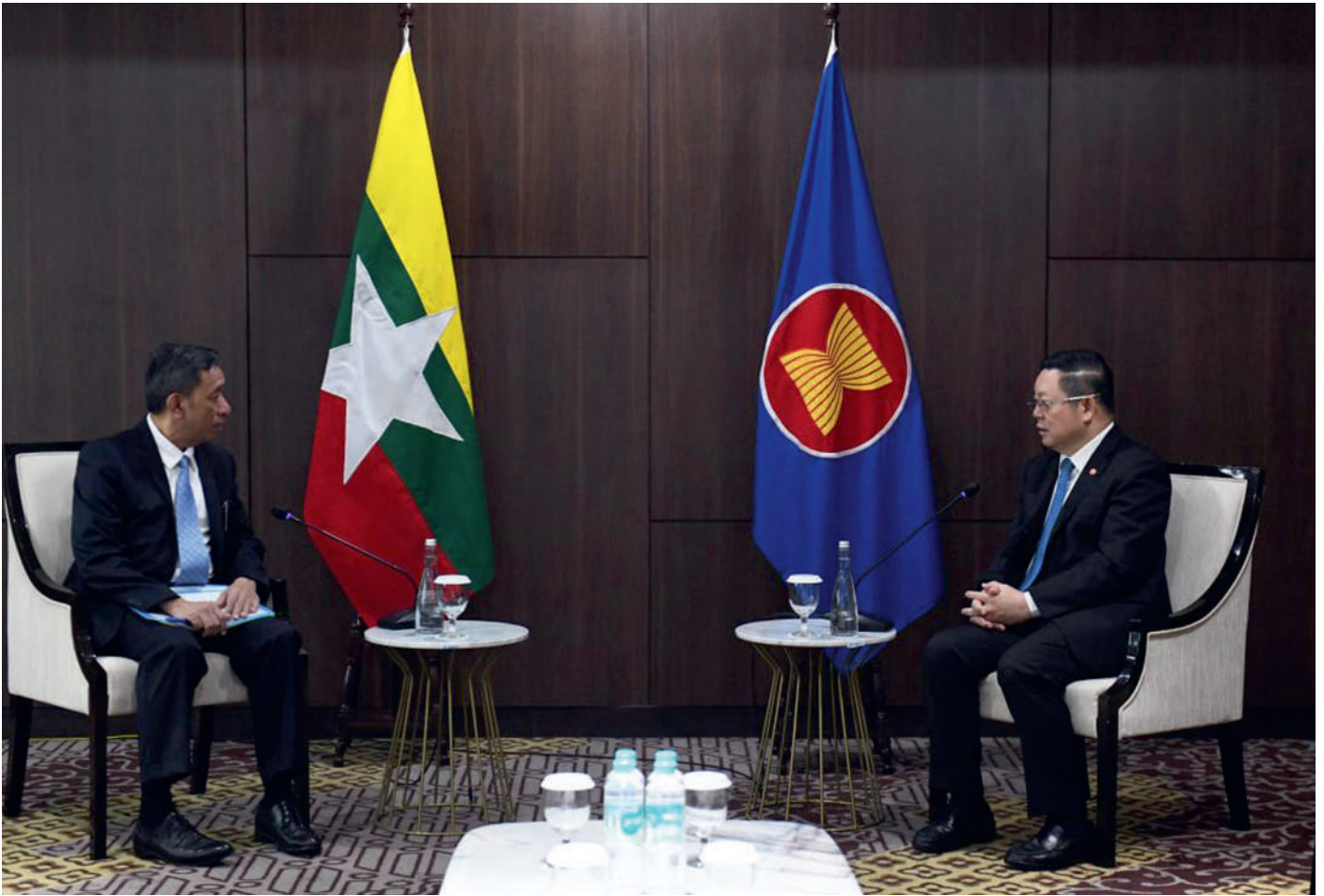
This troubled history over the latter part of the contemporary China-US relationship, spiking under the dual pressures of Covid and then Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, led to a progressive thinning out of senior level meetings and a public dialogue slipping toward point scoring rather than communication. Encouragingly, however, around April/May 2023, signs emerged of a preparedness to re-engage, perhaps stemming from a shared sense of undue risk and danger. President Biden said after a virtual bilateral discussion with President Xi in May that he expected a ‘thaw’. Then we heard that US Secretary of State Antony Blinken’s visit to Beijing (which had been cancelled angrily in January 2023 in the context of the bizarre episode involving errant Chinese reconnaissance and weather balloons over North America) would proceed. The willingness to re-engage persisted through the second half of 2023, culminating in China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi, travelling to Washington in late October to confirm the details of a Biden-Xi bilateral alongside the US-hosted APEC summit in November.

As was widely anticipated, ensuring that the post-Cold War geopolitical contours of the Indo-Pacific exhibited robust stability has proven to be an exceedingly challenging undertaking. As the Cold War unravelled in the early 1990’s, ASEAN was endorsed as the most suitable manager of the Indo-Pacific’s pioneering multilateral security process, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). Since that time, ASEAN has not hesitated to seek re-validation of its status, including through extending ‘ASEAN Centrality’ – the code phrase for this managerial role – to include new

processes (the ADMM plus and the East Asia Summit) that emerged to complement the ARF. The ARF was created in 1993-94 and – unusually – promptly commissioned itself to prepare a concept paper on its objectives and modalities. In light of the region’s unfamiliarity with multilateral practices, it was deemed appropriate that the ARF initially limit itself to confidence building through providing a forum for confidential discussions on regional security challenges before stepping up to the successively more demanding roles of preventive diplomacy and conflict resolution. Regrettably, no guidelines were laid down as to when and who would suggest that it was time for the ARF to move up this responsibility curve.

Collectively, we find ourselves exposed as having failed to foster attitudes and develop processes to manage and diminish the major sources of tension and conflict in the region. To the contrary, we have seen an intensifying animosity between the US and China that has deflated the regional spirit, inflamed quarrels, replaced optimism with trepidation and made Thucydides Trap into something of a regional theme song. The current critical phase in the development of the geopolitical contours of the Indo-Pacific places special responsibility on the shoulders of key actors – one of which is ASEAN – to try to divert and/or dilute the accumulated animosity between the US and China and point the region toward more collective, robustly stable outcomes. ASEAN must decide if the circumstances require it to move beyond quiet diplomacy and endeavour to shape the course of events. This publication has for several years suggested that ASEAN’s answer should be yes.

At the ASEAN summit in Jakarta in 2023, President Widodo urged his fellow ASEAN members to resist



17 March 2023. Jakarta, Indonesia. Secretary-General of ASEAN Dr Kao Kim Hourn meets with Permanent Representative of Myanmar to ASEAN Ambassador Aung Myo Myint. Credit: ASEAN.

pressures and temptations to take sides in the Sino-American contest and to thereby allow the ASEAN space to become an arena in this contest. This was an unusually blunt statement – probably driven by a shared concern that the policy autonomy of ASEAN states was at risk – but it stopped short of in any way counselling change in the behaviour of the US and China and in the reasoning that appeared to be driving their behaviour.

It is plainly a compelling interest to nurture the recent preparedness in China and the US to re-engage, seek to minimise the risks of a relapse into the deep animosity that seeped into the relationship in recent years (even decades) and nudge these giants toward a workable accommodation and a joint commitment to a more

constructive regional security agenda. While every state in the region should encourage and support this endeavour – and most certainly will – ASEAN has crucial agency in this regard. Any powerful actor seeking primacy in the region must either utterly intimidate or attract the positive support of this cluster of medium and small powers. This was the reality that led to ASEAN securing management of the ARF some 30 years ago and it remains the case today.

At the heart of ASEAN's narrative would be the proposition that for the foreseeable and, quite possibly, indefinite future, the presence of two disproportionately powerful states embedded in the region had to be recognised and accepted as a reality. This would echo the notion of inclusivity that permeates the

remarkable 2019 statement, *The ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific*. In a region such as ours, aspirations to contain or sweep away a rival power reflect an irresponsibly casual attitude to the stability and peace of the region. Reassessments of past conflicts in various parts of the world have sometimes exposed a propensity for key players to be driven by hazy and misleading images of a past golden age of influence and deference. Whether or not that is the case here, it would be a healthy precaution to assume that it is and to make a key message to both powers that, while the present and the future must and will draw on the past, aspiring to make them mirror the past is likely to be a prescription for disaster.

ASEAN leaders could use this as the foundation of a determination

“The core purpose of a rules-based order is to deter and defuse the propensity for the anarchical character of the international system to descend into open war between major powers...”

to encourage, provoke, require – whatever the circumstances seem to require or allow – an earnest dialogue with and between the US and China on the preferred character of the

region and the processes that need to be created to realise this aspiration. ASEAN leaders can draw on an abundance of skilled analysts to equip them with assessments of the scope for particular issues and/or themes to facilitate the development and inculcation of such an outlook on the part of both major powers – as well as to reinforce the message that ASEAN means business.

An important corollary to a conceptually assertive ASEAN would be a new attitude toward the region’s major security challenges other than the US-China rivalry itself. These include Taiwan, the Korean peninsula and the South China Sea. These are quite disparate issues but they all have originating

causes, have all evolved in response to changing circumstances and the actions, reactions, assessments and judgements made by the US and China have been of decisive importance in each case. These factors will be pivotal to endeavours to shape their further evolution. We have tended to focus attention on these issues only when they threaten to become unstable and to relish the intervening ‘quiet’ times. We need to find a means of keeping them under constant review, a permanent reminder – particularly to those most directly involved – of unfinished business requiring new insights and initiatives to shift entrenched attitudes, acknowledge regrets about past policy settings and identify novel paths to better outcomes.



12 October 2023. Jakarta, Indonesia. US Ambassador to ASEAN Yohannes Abraham hosted Secretary-General of ASEAN Dr Kao Kim Hourn. Credit: ASEAN.

ASEAN's leaders will quickly recognise the scale of the enterprise that leading China and the US toward reimagining the character of our region would constitute. There is significant overlap between the regional security challenge sketched above and the issue of trying to rebuild a workable international consensus on the so-called rules-based order. The core purpose of a rules-based order is to deter and defuse the propensity for the anarchical character of the international system to descend into open war between major powers – as occurred most recently in 1914 and 1939. The current order has thus far secured this core objective, suggesting that

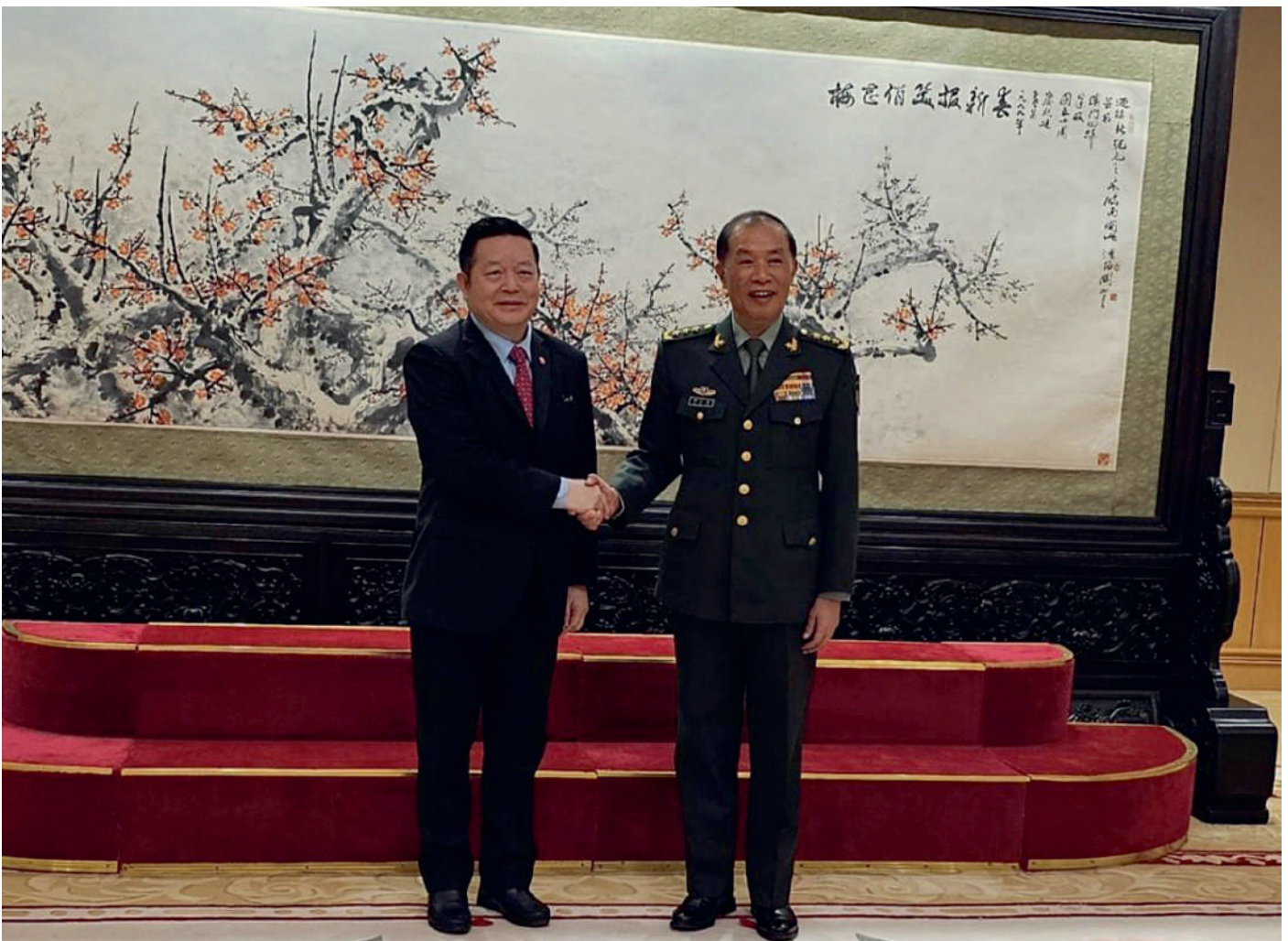
there is much to protect alongside those aspects that need to be adapted to reflect the interests and needs of the world of today and tomorrow. The rules-based order is perhaps best understood as clusters of guidelines in various fields (political, security, economic, social) that function in a broad, loose dynamic equilibrium created and sustained by inertia and the convenience of voluntary compliance together with the discipline or deterrent effect of possible penalties imposed by other participants in the order. An inherent feature of such an order is that one sometimes has to look closely to determine whether it is functioning, breaking down, broken, undergoing

natural and healthy refurbishment in response to changing political, economic and technological circumstances, or under calculated assault.

Whichever of these perspectives – regional security or rules-based order – has the stronger appeal, it is clear that our region is confronted with a truly formidable policy challenge, a challenge that will demand the best of all of us, including ASEAN.

Ron Huiskens

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30 October 2023. Beijing, China. Secretary-General of ASEAN Dr Kao Kim Hourn met with General He Weidong, Vice Chairman of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Military Commission. Credit: ASEAN.

America: Growing Risks of a US-China Crisis by Air or Sea

Gregory B. Poling

Reams of ink have been spilled over the rising tension across the Taiwan Strait and hypothetical timelines for a future Chinese invasion. But US-China conflict over Taiwan does not seem imminent, and any escalation would almost certainly be intentional. The same can be said of the unsolvable problem of North Korea's nuclear and missile development.

These are longstanding and intractable disputes, but do not seem primed to erupt into full-blown crisis in the immediate future. Two other issues might: the risks of unlooked-for escalation over the China-Philippines standoff around Second Thomas Shoal and the potential for a mid-air collision between Chinese aircraft and those of the United States or one of its allies.

Second Thomas Shoal

On 22 October 2023, two separate collisions took place near Second Thomas Shoal, on which the Philippines maintains a rapidly deteriorating foothold aboard the grounded BRP *Sierra Madre*. A China Coast Guard (CCG) ship

“...an eventual accident is a mathematical certainty.”

rammed a much smaller civilian vessel contracted by the Philippine Navy to resupply the garrison aboard the *Sierra Madre*. In video released by both China and the Philippines, the coastguard vessel can be seen blocking the path of the resupply ship, which attempts to evade by crossing the bow of the larger vessel and is struck. Luckily there were no serious injuries or damage. Separate videos show the second collision. The *Qiong Sansha Yu 00003*, a professional maritime militia vessel operated by China's state-owned Sansha Fisheries Development Company,

pulls alongside and then collides with a stationary Philippine Coast Guard ship. Again, the incident appeared to involve no serious damage, and a second Philippine resupply vessel managed to reach the *Sierra Madre*. But these were just the most dangerous interactions in a monthly pattern of unsafe conduct around Second Thomas Shoal over the last year.

The China Coast Guard has kept up a persistent patrol at Second Thomas Shoal since 2013, occasionally blocking resupply. For reasons that remain unclear, the CCG stepped up this harassment in the first half of 2022. The efforts to block resupply paused for a few months after President Ferdinand Marcos, Jr., was inaugurated president of the Philippines on June 30, 2022. But the harassment restarted at the end of the year. Over the course of 2023, reports of unsafe conduct by the CCG

and militia around the shoal have emerged roughly once a month. At the start of the year, a CCG vessel used a military-grade laser to temporarily blind the crew of a Philippine Coast Guard ship. In August, the CCG used a high-pressure water cannon on a resupply vessel; in several incidents, Chinese ships nearly collided with Philippine counterparts while trying to block their paths, and in one case came within a metre. Given this game of chicken, it was surprising that it took until October to have the first collisions. And if it keeps up, there will eventually be an even more violent and potentially deadly incident.

As Manila defends its legal rights, the United States is obliged by treaty and its own national interest to provide diplomatic and operational support as requested. This is because the Philippines' defence of claims touches on the two fundamental US interests

“The United States views the Philippines as the key actor at Second Thomas and follows its lead.”

in the South China Sea: the defence of alliance commitments and freedom of the seas. The United States does not believe it can abandon an ally in need without undermining the larger alliance network in Asia and therefore US military posture, nor does it want to see violence that would trigger mutual defence obligations. So, it seeks to support the Philippines while deterring outright aggression. Meanwhile, the Philippines' legal rights in the South China Sea as confirmed by its 2016 arbitration victory are inextricably tied to the broader question of freedom of the



17 June 2023. Sailors on the USS *Antietam* (CG-54) as it approaches the USS *Ronald Reagan* (CVN-76) for a replenishment at sea in the South China Sea. Credit: US Navy.

seas. The United States and other third countries cannot in the long term secure their own freedom of navigation or the overall regime of international maritime law without helping defend the rights of all states.

For these reasons, a US patrol aircraft has been overhead during most, if not all, of the resupply mission this year, observing and letting all sides know that Manila does not stand alone. This is just the most visible aspect of an ongoing modernisation process in the US-Philippines alliance that began with the November 2021 Joint Vision Statement on a 21st Century United States-Philippines Partnership. The United States and Philippines have launched a new maritime security dialogue, negotiated their first-ever defence guidelines, significantly increased joint training and capacity building efforts, and undertaken a rapid implementation and expansion of the 2014 Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement to improve Philippine military bases and grant the United States rotational access. Similar efforts are underway between the Philippines, Australia, and Japan.

The situation around Second Thomas also highlights the key difference between the US and Chinese approaches to the South China Sea. The United States views the Philippines as the key actor at Second Thomas and follows its lead. US policy is to support and advise, but it stands behind its allies and partners and can do only as much as they ask. That is why there are no US vessels escorting resupply missions to Second Thomas, though who knows what might become possible if China's coercion escalates.

By contrast, Beijing refuses to acknowledge that the Philippines or other small states have any agency in the disputes. Any objections they raise to Chinese behaviour are brushed

aside as an American plot. And that increases the risks of escalation as Beijing mistakenly believes other states are less committed to their sovereignty and rights, defy China only because of US interference, and will eventually buckle in the face of sustained pressure. Running the same coercive play over and over at Second Thomas Shoal seems unlikely to change Philippine policy and so will only lead to further collisions and risk escalation.

Freedom of Navigation and Unsafe Intercepts

Second Thomas Shoal is the most publicised site of threats to freedom of the seas and navigation, but it is not the most frequent. US officials have been warning since 2022 about an increasing trend of dangerous interactions between People's Liberation Army Air Force planes and those of the United States and other nations over international waters in the East and South China Seas. Assistant Secretary of Defense Ely Ratner made this a centrepiece of his speech at the 2022 CSIS South China Sea Conference, referring to an exponential increase in unsafe air intercepts and promising to declassify data to prove the charge. In the year after that speech, the US Department of Defense released photos and video of several such incidents, and Australia and Canada made similar accusations.

In one of the most dangerous incidents, a Chinese fighter jet in early 2022 intentionally released chaff into the engine of an Australian P-8 conducting surveillance over the South China Sea. In October 2023, another Chinese jet approached to within just a few metres of a Canadian patrol aircraft monitoring North Korean violations of UN sanctions in the East China Sea. In that case, Beijing claimed the Canadian plane entered the

territorial airspace of the disputed Senkaku Islands, which Ottawa denies. It was not, in any case, the only such recent interaction. At the June 2023 Shangri-La Dialogue, Canada's defence minister Anand called out China's increasing harassment of lawful Canadian overflight and answered angrily when questioned by a People's Liberation Army officer during her panel. US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin also made the rise of unsafe interactions at air and sea a central focus of his keynote speech at Shangri-La, in which he called on China's leadership to help set up crisis communication mechanisms and avoid escalation. Just hours after his speech, a Chinese naval vessel cut across the bow of a US counterpart transiting the international waters of the Taiwan Strait, avoiding a collision only because the US vessel veered off. A Canadian warship was present to film and publicise the incident.

These anecdotes have created a vague perception that the risk of accidental collisions and escalation is rising. In October 2023, Assistant Secretary Ratner helped quantify that risk when he finally previewed the data on unsafe air intercepts to be included in the Pentagon's annual report on China's military. According to Ratner,

Since the Fall of 2021, we have seen more than 180 such incidents – more in the past two years than in the decade before that. That's nearly 200 cases where PLA [People's Liberation Army] operators have performed reckless manoeuvres or discharged chaff, or shot off flares, or approached too rapidly or too close to US aircraft – all as part of trying to interfere with the ability of US forces to operate safely in places where we and every country in the world have every right to be under international law. And when you take into account cases of coercive

and risky PLA intercepts against other states, the number increases to nearly 300 cases against US, ally and partner aircraft over the last two years.

This means that PLA aircraft are intentionally creating risks of midair collision about every 2.5 days. At that rate, an eventual accident is a mathematical certainty. The last thing the already tense geopolitical environment needs is a repeat of the 2001 incident in which a PLA fighter jet collided with a US patrol aircraft causing the Chinese pilot's death and weeks-long diplomatic crisis between Washington and Beijing. And that occurred at a time of much better Sino-US relations than exists today. It is hard to imagine how the two countries, whose militaries

have virtually no communication at present, could deescalate another such crisis.

China's revisionist interpretations of international law, including both its efforts to claim historic rights across the South China Sea and to restrict foreign military activity in the international waters and airspace of the Taiwan Strait, East China Sea, and South China Sea, is not going to change any time soon. Neither is the US commitment to its fundamental interests in these waterways. And Southeast Asian claimants seem equally unlikely to abandon their lawful rights in the face of Chinese coercion. The disputes are, therefore, something to be managed rather than solved for the foreseeable future. And the most pressing needs are to

establish functional communication mechanisms to deescalate when dangerous interactions inevitably occur, and for China to cease the tactic of violating international law and norms of safe conduct at air and sea to intentionally create risks of collision. That tactic is not working at Second Thomas Shoal, in the airspace above the East and South China Seas, or in myriad other places. It is only increasing the likelihood of unintended escalation.

Gregory B. Poling

Senior Fellow and Director, Southeast Asia Program and Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, Center for Strategic and International Studies.



27 October 2023. Washington, D.C. US President Joe Biden meets with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi. Credit: Photo/Xinhua.

Japan's New National Security Strategy

Kanehara Nobukatsu



17 October 2023. Kobe City, Japan. Launch of Taigei-class submarine *Raigei* SS-516. Credit: @TAIGEI_SS513.

On 16 December 2022, Prime Minister Kishida Fumio's cabinet approved three national security documents. The three documents were the National Security Strategy (NSS), the National Defense Strategy (NDS), and the Defense Buildup Program (DBP) 2022. He also declared that the government would double Japan's defense budget over the next five years.

The international environment surrounding Japan has continued to deteriorate over the past decade, with China's rapid military build-up and unilateral and coercive expansionism, North Korea's growing nuclear ambitions, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, increasingly severe events related to climate change, and supply change resilience issues that are shaking the liberal trade system. The updating of the three documents was very timely.

Early steps under Prime Minister Abe

The Japanese government began preparing these national security documents back in 2013, when the second Abe Shinzo administration formulated the very first NSS in Japanese history and simultaneously revised the National Defense Program Guidelines (now renamed as NDS) and the Medium-Term Defense Program (now renamed as DBP 2022 and which addresses the defence build-up program over the ensuing 5 years).

During the eight years after the second Abe administration took office, China's economy had become three times larger than Japan's and supported a dramatic increase in China's military power. In 2013 and 2018, the National Defense Program Guidelines, with China in mind, emphasised the strategic importance

of the southwestern part of Japan, seeking improved mobility through creating the Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade, and focusing on new cross-domain fields (especially space, cyber, and electromagnetic).

Kishida's National Security Strategy

The NSS generally describes a comprehensive national strategy for national security. In particular, diplomatic strategy plays a central role. Japan views the NSS as the pinnacle of its array of strategy documents, not least to stress that its diplomatic strategy is positioned ahead of its defence and military strategies.

Postwar Japan developed a diplomatic strategy based on the Japan-US alliance. During the Yoshida Shigeru and Kishi Nobusuke premierships,

“Japan views the NSS as the pinnacle of its array of strategy documents, not least to stress that its diplomatic strategy is positioned ahead of its defense and military strategies.”

Japan, like West Germany, chose the alliance with the US as the cornerstone of its postwar diplomacy despite its defeat in the war against the US. They had to face the strong opposition of the Socialist Party of Japan, the Japanese Communist Party, and leftist elements in the media, all of which had strong ideological sympathy for the Eastern camp (the Communist bloc). Under Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro who had the task of assessing the significance for Japan of the new phase in the Cold War that followed the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1979), Japan clearly confirmed its position as “a member of the West.”

In the seventy-five years since the end of World War II, the international environment has undergone several major upheavals. Each time, relations between the major powers, underwent tectonic shifts, and potential threats to Japan also shifted and changed, but the cornerstone of the Japan-US alliance remained unshakable.

The framework of the international power alignments changed from ‘US, UK, France, China, and Russia’ versus ‘Japan, Germany and Italy’ (1937-1945); ‘US, UK, France, Japan, and West Germany’ versus ‘China and Russia’ (1950s-1970s); ‘US, UK, France, Japan, West Germany and China’ versus ‘Russia and India’

(1970s-1991); these alignments loosened up somewhat during the end of the Cold War and counter terrorism period (roughly 1991-2010) before reforming to ‘US, UK, France, Japan, Germany and India’ versus ‘China and Russia’ (the present day).

The main potential threat to Japan had shifted from Russia during the Cold War time to nuclear North Korea in 1990s. Today, the focus is on a rising China and the future of Taiwan. But an underlying constant has been a Japanese foreign policy based upon the Japan-US Alliance. This has not changed since the Pacific War.

Once the diplomatic strategy – in particular, alliance policy and the networking/policy coordination practices of like-minded nations – is defined, the framework of the country’s national security strategy is determined. The process of developing the NSS identifies friends and potential enemies as well as probable and potential conflicts.

Japan’s diplomatic strategy is based upon several elements: a) to make the Japan-US alliance a linchpin of national security; b) to strengthen partnerships with other US allies in the region, such as Korea, Australia, New Zealand and the Philippines; c) to strengthen partnership with the coastal nations of the South China Sea such as Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines; d) to strengthen ties with rising India and to reinvigorate the Quad (Japan, India, Australia and US); e) to coordinate strategic assessments and postures with European nations, especially members of the European Union and the UK as well as members of NATO; and f) to develop a diplomatic network that links up friendly nations throughout the entire Indo-Pacific region.

Kishida’s National Defense Strategy

After the national security strategy is written, it is the job of the Japan Ministry of Defense and the JSDF to consider the kind of military capabilities they will need and to think through how combat operations in each potential conflict could unfold. This work is assembled in the National Defense Strategy.

In response to changes in international relations, such as the collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of the Cold War and the rise of China since the beginning of the 21st century, the focus of Japan’s strategic and defence thinking has slowly shifted from the Hokkaido area to the southwestern part of Japan.

The conflict scenarios that currently preoccupy Japan’s security experts include China’s invasion of Taiwan and seizure of the Senkaku Islands, North Korean military provocations conducted against the backdrop of its nuclear capabilities, and Russia’s entry into a conflict over Taiwan war or conducting a supportive diversionary action.

These scenarios mean that the focus of Japan’s defence has shifted from land warfare to cope with a Russian invasion of Hokkaido in the northern part of the country to battles in the ocean and on the islands scattered about in the southwestern regions of the country. In particular, the JGSDF

“...the focus of Japan’s strategic and defence thinking has slowly shifted from the Hokkaido area to the southwestern part of Japan.”

will be required to significantly improve its mobility.

The logical structure of the US National Security Strategy is similar: NSS, NDS, and military strategy. In contrast to the US, however, Japan does not prepare a separate military strategy that describes how it will fight. In Japan's system, this element of a comprehensive strategy is integrated into the NDS. Ideally, a separate military strategy called the 'Integrated Defense Strategy of Japan' should be drawn up in the future.

New focus on 'values' in the National Security Strategy

The current NSS has defined Japan's national interests in the following way: (1) liberal democratic values, (2) prosperity based on a market economy, and (3) national independence and the security of the nation and its people.

The first postwar Japanese foreign minister to address the issue of values in the conduct of diplomacy head-on was Aso Taro, Minister for Foreign Affairs in the first Abe administration (He later became Prime Minister), more than a decade after the end of the Cold War. As Foreign Minister in 2006, he delivered a speech entitled 'Arc of Freedom and Prosperity,' in which he laid out his vision of extending the liberal international order to the outer edges of the Eurasian continent. It was the first speech to clarify Japan's position on these matters since Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro's 'member of the West' statement made during what the Reagan Administration called the 'new Cold War' following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

Japan's current foreign policy considers that supporting the West's international liberal order and its universal values it aspires to uphold – such as freedom, equality, the rule

of law, and the market economy – is in itself a means to further enhance Japan's own national interests. Japan's current foreign policy also holds that Japan should not simply pursue only its own national interests in a self-serving manner but should also be aware of the responsibilities associated with Japan having the weight and strength to be among the pillars supporting the international liberal order. The current NSS clearly expresses this awareness and sense of responsibility.

Comprehensive approach of DIME in NSS

Another feature of the current national security strategy is that it discusses DIME head-on. Often referred to by the United States National Security Council (NSC), DIME is a comprehensive national security concept that encompasses all aspects of Diplomatic, Information, Military and Economic activities.

The current NSS adopts a comprehensive approach through mobilising and bringing to bear all four dimensions of DIME when addressing security challenges. This is the correct approach. It is in line with Sun Tzu's Art of War ('To win one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the acme of skill.') and the indirect approach advocated by Liddell Hart. However, it can be readily appreciated that getting multiple, heavily stove-piped government departments to collaborate effectively across a broad range of national security issues is fraught with difficulty. In fact, cross-functional coordination between all ministries and agencies across the government for the purpose of national security is nothing but heavy weight lifting. Strong Prime Ministerial leadership is indispensable.

Priority issues in Kishida's NSS

The current NSS refers to a number of important issues, many of which have been identified in the past, including the strengthening of logistic capabilities to keep fighting (ammunition, ammunition magazines, components, etc.), the utilisation of Japanese scientific and technological capabilities in defence, maritime security, space security, cybersecurity, civil protection, and evacuation of Japanese nationals abroad in contingencies. The current NSS suggests that there are four issues that the government sees as preeminent concerns.

First is the counter-attack capabilities. Potential adversaries like China, North Korea, and Russia have large numbers of ballistic and cruise missiles that can reach Japan. China is currently capable of landing 2,000 missiles on Japan. South Korea and Taiwan also have missiles of the same kind. Until the second Abe administration, Japan alone was restricted to possession of short-range missiles (maximum range 200 kilometres). Japan's single and the most important ally, the United States who had been bound by the INF treaty until recently, has no ground based intermediate missiles in the region.

Prime Minister Abe decided to introduce some medium-range missiles (Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missiles, JASSM; range 1,000 km) during the 2018 revision of the National Defense Program Guidelines. This time, Prime Minister Kishida made clear that intermediate-range missiles should be acquired for counter-attacking enemy territories. It means that Japan will be able to say 'We will shoot back,' when missiles are about to be fired toward Japanese soil from North Korea, China, or Russia.

It also means that the division of missions and roles between Japan



11 January 2023. Washington, DC. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken and Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III co-host meeting with Japanese Foreign Minister Hayashi Yoshimasa and Japanese Defense Minister Hamada Yasukazu. Credit: DoD photo USAF Tech. Sgt. Jack Sanders.

and the US will have to be adjusted. Until now, the US military has been referred to as the ‘spear’ in charge of offense operations against the enemy’s territories and the JSDF as the ‘shield’ in charge of the defence of Japan. In the near future, Japan will also be able to take the ‘spear’ role. The task ahead is to redefine the missions and roles of Japanese and US forces in regional contingencies. The Guidelines for Japan-US Defense Cooperation must also be rewritten in due course.

The next remaining challenge is the early development and full deployment of hypersonic and ballistic missiles – which are difficult to intercept – to complement the cruise missiles being acquired from the US or being developed domestically.

Second is cybersecurity. The strengthening of Japan’s cyber defence capabilities, which have been exposed as utterly inadequate, is an urgent task. There is an urgent requirement to introduce active defence measures

that enable monitoring of cyberspace, detection of enemy viruses, creation of databases, attribution of virus to the offender, and back hacking. These activities must be authorised not only in war time but also in peace time.

Third is the creation of the Joint Commander position and of a headquarters for joint operations. In the aftermath of the Great East Japan earthquake in 2011, General Oriki Ryoichi, Chief of Staff, Joint Staff, having assisted the Prime Minister Kan Naoto in the response to the nuclear power plant disaster in Fukushima, advocated strongly the creation of the post of the Joint Commander and his Headquarters, capable of commanding all the components, including Ground, Maritime and Air forces, of the JSDF.

The fact that the NDS finally calls for the establishment of the Joint Commander and the headquarters is a major step forward in establishing a truly effective war fighting command

structure for the JSDF. Furthermore, this is necessary for smooth coordination with the US Forces.

Finally, let me add that JASDF will expand its activities in outer space through the establishment in the near future of the Japan Aerospace Self-Defense Force.

The formulation of the new NSS and NDS is an ambitious step, worthy of being regarded as a major shift in Japan’s postwar defence policy. The political leadership, governmental officials and the military must work together to make a reality of what is written in NSS and NDS. The real work has just begun.

Kanehara Nobukatsu

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India: Forsaking Strategic Autonomy for Strategic Alignment in the Indo-Pacific

Sourabh Gupta

At first sight, 2023 was a breakout year of sorts for Indian diplomacy.

On September 9-10th, New Delhi chaired the G20 Leaders' Summit for the first time and showcasing its bridge-building skills, marshalled a consensus among the major powers on the Russia-Ukraine language in the leaders' declaration. The G20 finance ministers' and foreign ministers' meetings earlier in the year had produced only a chair's summary; as such, there were understandable fears that a leaders' declaration might not be issued for the first time since the inauguration of the G20 framework. In the event, India's successful hosting drew praise from the United States and Russia alike.

Earlier in June, Prime Minister Narendra Modi paid his second state visit to the United States, where he joined a rarefied list of world leaders who have addressed a joint sitting of Congress on more than one occasion (Modi's earlier visit and address to Congress was in 2016). Prior to the visit, the US and India finalised a Defense Industrial Cooperation Roadmap and during the visit, an agreement was signed to enable the transfer of General Electric's advanced F-414 engine technology for manufacture in India. Going one better, during his state visit to France to commemorate Bastille Day the following month, Modi and President Macron agreed to pursue joint development and local manufacture of combat aircraft engines in India. Earlier in the year, the national security advisors of the US and India had held an inaugural meeting of their Initiative on Critical and Emerging

Technologies (iCET), which spans the range from defense technology cooperation to semiconductor supply chains to space and next-generation telecommunications.

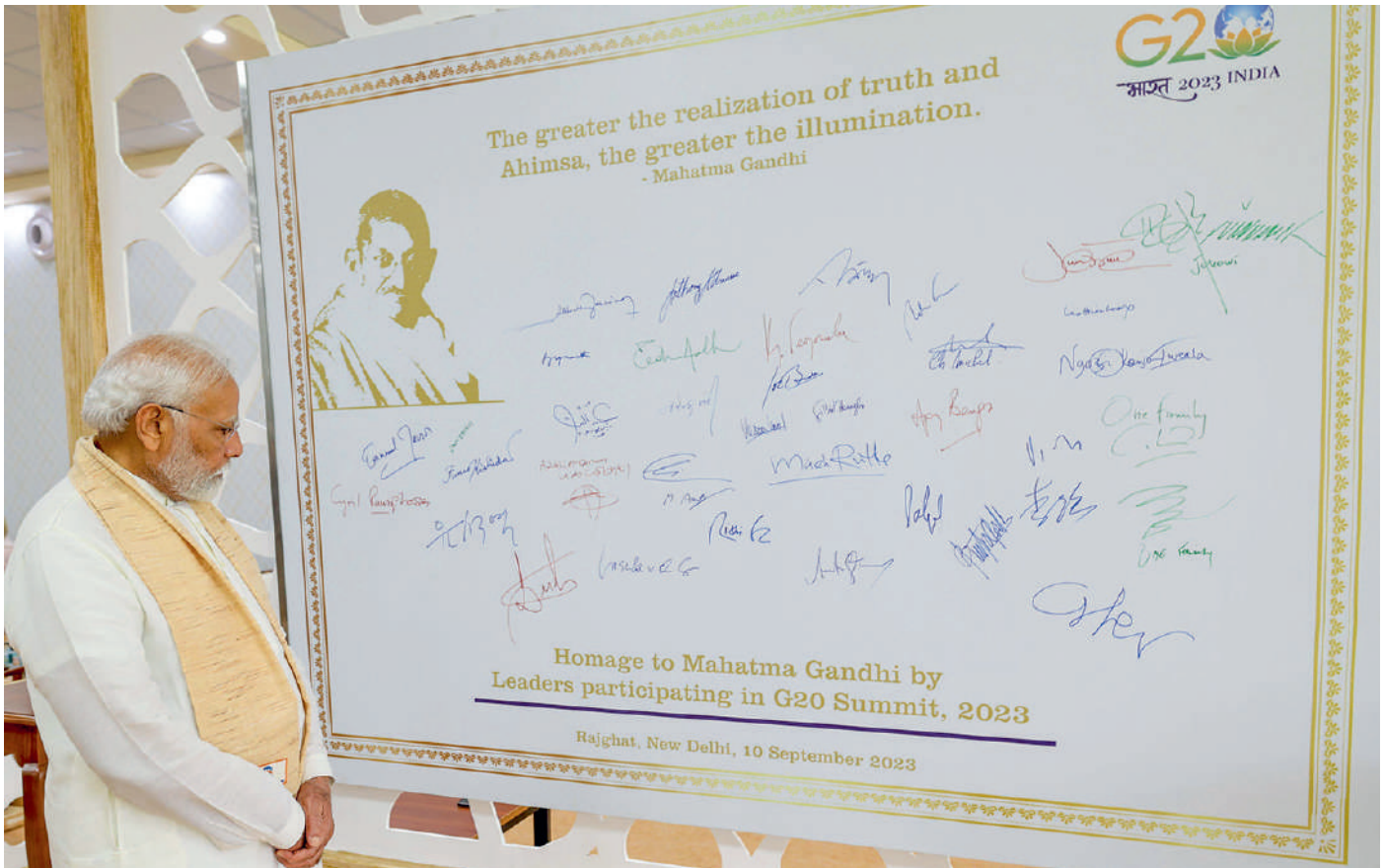
In May, Narendra Modi paid a first visit by an Indian prime minister to Papua New Guinea and co-chaired the Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC). The forum was scheduled, interestingly, back-to-back with Washington's hosting of its own US-Pacific Islands Forum in Port Moresby, and at FIPIC Modi reaffirmed New Delhi's participation alongside the US, Japan and Australia in a telecommunications network modernisation project in Palau. In August, the former service chiefs of India's army, navy and air force attended an Indo-Pacific security conference in Taipei for the first time, as part of a study commissioned by India's top military commander six weeks earlier to examine New Delhi's role during a full-blown Taiwan contingency. The study was itself prompted by discreet American inquiries on the role and contributions by India in the event of a war in the Taiwan Strait.

In July, Prime Minister Modi chaired the Heads of State Summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) for the first time, consolidating India's strategically autonomous positioning in global international relations. In a dozen or so votes at the United Nations in 2022 and 2023 on the Ukraine conflict, New Delhi has abstained from condemning Russia despite acute pressure from its Western partners to do so. It even participated in a weeklong

multinational military drill hosted by Moscow in 2022.

The following month in Johannesburg, India along with its BRICS partners welcomed six new members as part of the grouping's first major expansion. Of the six new members, Mr. Modi played host or paid a state visit to three of them - Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt - in 2023, reinforcing a genuine foreign policy innovation of his premiership so far: a re-equilibration of strategic equities in the Middle East in favour of the major Sunni Arab Gulf monarchies, along with a qualitative deepening of ties with Israel. To this end, New Delhi bucked its voting trend on the Israel-Palestine issue at the UN General Assembly in October, abstaining on a resolution that otherwise commanded a significant majority (120 to 14, with 45 states abstaining) which called for a humanitarian truce between Israel and the Palestinian militant group Hamas. In 2023, New Delhi also burnished its credentials with the 'Global South', hosting a 'Voice of Global South Summit' in January and championing the developing country cause as an invited guest at the G7 Hiroshima Summit.

To be clear, the Modi government compiled a less flattering list of accomplishments too. In September, Indian government operatives were credibly linked to the extraterritorial killing of a militant Khalistani Sikh activist on Canadian soil – surely, a new low in New Delhi's use of power in international relations. In October, a Qatari court sentenced eight retired Indian navalmen, some of



9 September 2023. New Delhi, India. G20 Leaders' Summit. Credit: G20.

them decorated, to the death penalty for espionage activities on behalf of Israel. Although contracted in their private capacities to supervise the induction of Italian stealth submarines into the Qatari Emiri Naval Force (QENF), it is hard to believe that the Government of India's fingerprints were not present. Also, in October, Mr. Modi paid a visit to a disputed border village on the India-Nepal boundary, a rare prime ministerial outing to a piece of real estate in dispute that is not the norm in Indian or international diplomacy. And earlier in July, the Modi government trashed a Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) order on a preliminary award pertaining to the Pakistan v. India Indus Water Treaty proceedings in language eerily similar to that reserved for the Philippines v. China South China Sea tribunal by Beijing.

Be that as it may, the bold brush strokes of India's foreign policy in 2023 eclipsed the few indiscretions committed. On closer scrutiny though, the brush strokes are much less than they appear to be (aside from the government's transformative Middle East outreach).

India's decision to abstain on the Ukraine-related votes at the UN General Assembly had less to do with its decades-long friendship with Moscow or some abstract attachment to multipolarity and more to do with its realist interest in limiting Moscow's strategic overdependence on Beijing. Reluctant acquiescence of this assessment as well as carveouts from the punishing extraterritorial sanctions was obtained from Washington on the implicit premise that New Delhi's anti-China posture in the Indo-Pacific region would be preserved.

The paring down of the anti-Russia language and issuance thereby of a consensus leaders' declaration at the G20 summit was less a reflection of New Delhi's consummate bridge-building skills as much as it was a concession bestowed by the United States and the western powers to project India as a successful G20 host. With Xi Jinping absent in New Delhi, the need to project this contrast was all the more urgent. In the Bali G20 Leaders' Declaration of November 2022, Moscow had been 'condemned' for its 'war in Ukraine' and its actions 'deplore[d] in the strongest terms' as 'aggression' against Kyiv. With Moscow and Beijing opposed to a repetition of the Bali language in the New Delhi Declaration, and with the Modi government staring at the prospect of being the first G20 chair unable to hammer out a consensus communique, the US stepped in and

acquiesced to the removal of the references ‘condemning’ Russia and its ‘aggression’ against Ukraine.

Tellingly, the Quad Leaders’ Declaration of May 2023 too had glossed over Moscow’s responsibility in deference to Indian sensitivities, foreshadowing the dispensability of Kyiv in the G20 statement so as to project common cause among major ‘like-minded’ democracies against authoritarian regimes.

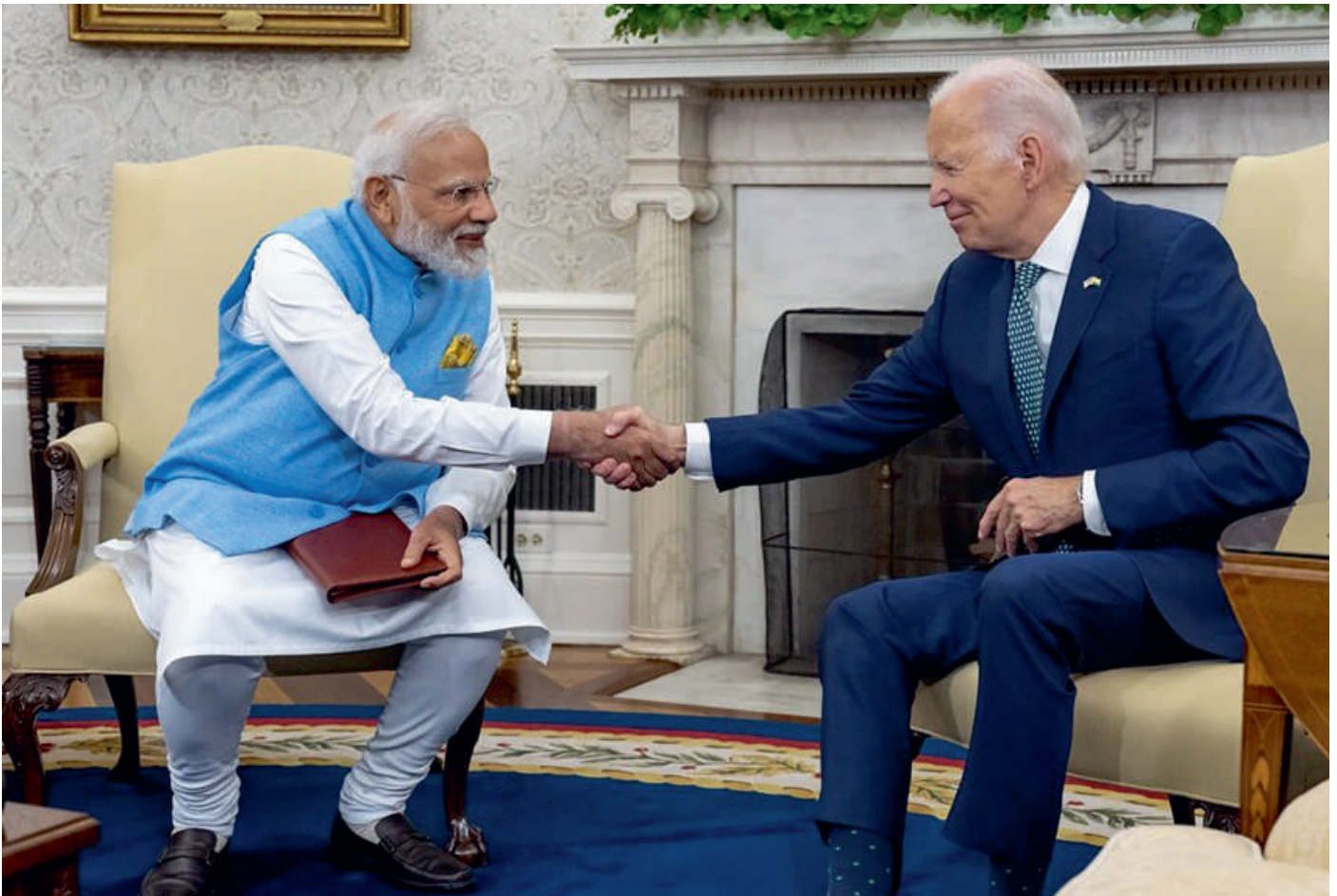
The Modi government’s foray into the Pacific Island nations was motivated less by development-related goals and more as a strategic quid pro quo to ‘crowd-in’ its Quad partners in South Asia, and thus help rebalance against growing Chinese influence in the sub-region. The Pacific outreach amounts, in effect, to an exercise in

mutual backscratching with New Delhi reciprocating Washington and Tokyo in kind for their active political and economic engagement in South Asia of late. China has been excluded moreover from all relevant India-inspired initiatives or institutional arrangements in Indian Ocean region – be it the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), the Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) or, for the matter, even the International Solar Alliance (ISA).

A single point agenda – the obsessive need to countervail any advantage that could accrue to China on the Indo-Pacific’s geopolitical canvas – was the common thread that tied together India’s diplomatic strategy in 2023. This anti-China fixation,

“... India’s successful hosting [of the G20] drew praise from the United States and Russia alike.”

not unlike neighbour Pakistan’s own anti-India fixation, stems from the loss of effective control and patrolling rights over approximately 1,000 sq. kms of disputed territory on the Ladakh Himalayan frontier to Beijing since 2020. This setback also galvanised a more wholesome embrace of Washington’s regional strategy as well as a readiness to stay in Washington’s good graces –



22 June 2023. Washington D.C., United States. Republic of India Official State Visit to the United States. Credit: US Department of State.

“Strategic autonomy has effectively given way to strategic alignment with the US and the West in the Indo-Pacific region...”

to the extent that India’s cherished maxim of strategic autonomy is practiced at times now at the pleasure of the United States. And vice-versa, Washington flatteringly paid lip service to this Indian quest for autonomy so long as it was framed not so much in support of US policies necessarily as much as it was employed in opposition to China’s regional and global interests.

Tripped up by its haste to play the multipolar game on the ‘front foot’

In November 2019, while delivering the Goenka memorial lecture, India’s external affairs minister S. Jaishankar sketched out New Delhi’s journey from non-alignment to multi-engagement while keeping intact the kernel of non-alignment – that being strategic autonomy. Engaging multiple players in the search for ‘convergences’ was key to maximising India’s options to widen the strategic space for the country to judge and act on its own self-interest. In a ‘multipolar world’, he observed, this was ‘a game best played on the front foot, appreciating that progress on any one front strengthens one’s hand on all others.’ Risk-taking was ‘an inherent aspect’ of the process.

A decade earlier, his predecessor Pranab Mukherjee had conveyed a similar message – albeit without introducing the risk-taking factor,

when he noted that the simultaneous deepening of India’s relations with all the major power centres had created an upward spiral of improving relations with them. Increased cooperation with one power opened the door to wider room for manoeuvre with the others. He had cautioned at the time though that the essence of India’s challenge lay in ensuring autonomy of judgement so that no one set of relations would be ranged against or be at the expense of another. In Mr. Jaishankar’s haste to play the multipolar game on the ‘front foot’, this admonition went unheeded.

The Modi government’s relationship with China has been based not so much on a search for convergences as much as it has been on injecting ‘external balancers’ – the US initially, and the Quad more lately – into the bilateral equation, with a view to rebalance Chinese power as well as raise the geopolitical cost of the latter’s perceived hostility to India’s rise in global affairs. Aligning geopolitically, economically (in the area of critical supply chains) and militarily with the US and its partners in the Indo-Pacific region would elicit a more constructive approach towards India, it was thought.

The outcome has been quite the opposite. Beijing’s stubborn refusal to bend to New Delhi’s will has been informed by two cardinal principles – first, that no amount of pressuring China by standing on the shoulders of third parties will achieve that which can be realised through good neighbourly relations in an exclusively bilateral context. And second, that the downside cost of bad relations with China will outweigh the upside benefit of ganging-up with the US and West on China. A willingness to deploy coercive but limited use of force at expedient pressure points along the undefined bilateral frontier, dictated no doubt by local circumstances that the Modi government unwittingly

invited, was also key to pressing its case against New Delhi.

In this combustive test of wills, the political space to maintain an ‘autonomy of judgment’ on major power relations has evaporated in New Delhi, and a key pillar of its multi-aligned policy – the now-mismanaged China relationship – that was intended to facilitate an upward spiral of improving relations and widen the room for strategic manoeuvre has crumbled. Strategic autonomy has effectively given way to strategic alignment with the US and the West in the Indo-Pacific region – an outcome not entirely of New Delhi’s choosing.

With India and the United States now entering election season, the outlook for New Delhi’s foreign policy in 2024 is likely to resemble more of the same.

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Russia: A Real Turn to Asia

Ekaterina Koldunova



18 October 2023. Beijing, China. President Vladimir speaking at the opening of the Third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation.
Credit: Artem Ivanov / TASS.

Russian political leadership has been advocating the idea of a more proactive Russian stance towards Asia for almost two decades. Until quite recently, however, the eastward turn in Russian foreign policy remained more discursive than empirical. Even initial Western sanctions imposed on Russia after the 2014 referendum in Crimea did not make much change. With the exception of China, Russia still lacked tight economic interdependence with the majority of its Asian partners. Its political and economic elite continued to be predominantly Europe-centred and perceived Asia as an important but still rather secondary diplomatic front. The political and military crisis in Ukraine and the broader

crisis of 2022-23 with the European security architecture coupled with the mounting US and EU sanctions triggered transformative change in Russian foreign policy and security outlook, as well as its economy. While the main security threats, in Russia's official vision, were emanating from the structural dysfunctionalities of the international security system and the US-led North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) unrestricted advancement in Europe and potentially in Asia, the emphasis of Russia's diplomatic efforts shifted markedly to the Asia-led international platforms.

In reality rather than just in words, Russian political and economic decision-makers finally became

serious about developments in Asia, seeking opportunities to cooperate and addressing shortcomings in Russia's relations with the region. Adopted in March 2023, the new Russian Foreign Policy Concept – the official document defining the main directions of Russian foreign policy – prioritised institutional frameworks that brought Russia together with Asian states, such as BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Russia-India-China trilateral meeting and the multilateral institutions in the Asia Pacific. The latter appeared as number one among other non-Western regions in the Foreign Policy Concept's section defining Russian regional priorities in forging a just and stable world order.

Those who previously cautioned that Russia's pivot to Asia was a pivot to China only also got more opportunities to advance their case. Drifting into China's economic orbit after 2022 in terms of energy, financial and infrastructural cooperation, Russia catalysed many international processes which had been embryonic or slow to develop. In 2022, Russia-China trade reached USD 190 billion, up almost 30%, and continued to grow further in 2023. Furthermore, over the first six months of 2023 the share of Sino-Russian trade conducted in renminbi surged to 75% (in contrast to 3% in 2021). Equally, the renminbi expanded its role in Russia's trade with other partners in Asia. As a result, even though the renminbi's role in overall international transactions was still not a major challenge to the US dollar, in 2023 the renminbi was the fifth ranked international currency, and trending upward.

In contrast with almost complete diplomatic decoupling between Russia and the US – EU, diplomatic contacts between Russia and China demonstrated continuity. President Xi Jinping visited Moscow in March 2023 and President Vladimir Putin participated in the Third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in Beijing in October the same year.

President Xi's visit to Moscow ended up with the Joint Statement on Deepening the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Coordination for the New Era. One of its key messages was that it was inaccurate to reduce all the complexity of Russia-China relations to the notion of a military alliance of the Cold War era. Russia and China stressed that their relations actually exceeded any form of military alliance but at the same time did not target any third party. The Statement also spoke about two conflicting international trends.

The first one, which both parties considered irreversible, was the trend of growing multipolarity with a more visible role of regional powers and developing states in international relations. The second trend was the rise of hegemonism, unilateralism and protectionism as a counter-reaction to the first trend.

“Russia and China stressed that their relations actually exceeded any form of military alliance but at the same time did not target any third party.”



28 March 2023. Sea of Japan. Russia fires test anti-ship missiles at mock targets during military exercises. Credit: Russian Defence Ministry / TASS.



7 September 2023. Jakarta, Indonesia. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov attended the 18th East Asia Summit. Credit: Russian MFA.

Even though President Xi’s visit to Russia took place amidst growing international uncertainties, the Statement’s primary focus was on the issues of co-development. The same tone dominated the Putin-Xi meeting in Beijing. Bilateral talks in October 2023 emphasised the readiness to work together in times of ‘changes unseen in a century’, as President Xi had put it earlier. Both parties reconfirmed their readiness to continue developing links between China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). Beyond linkages between the BRI and the EEU, the two leaders mentioned the Russia-China-Mongolia economic corridor, an idea, which had reemerged in the political-economic discourse between the three neighbouring countries almost a decade after its inception.

Meanwhile speculation about a Russia-China military alliance continued to appear regularly in the Western media, remaining largely misleading about the nature of this relationship. Indeed, Russia and China continued their regular military drills as they did during previous years. In 2023, these drills took place in the Sea of Japan, signalling that both countries’ security focus was on the actions of Japan and South Korea, both US military allies ready to step up ties with NATO. Both Russia and China reacted negatively to NATO’s plans to expand military cooperation with Japan under the so-called Individually Tailored Partnership Program (ITPP) adopted in July 2023. At the same time, Chinese participation in the Western countries-led military exercises became limited. For instance,

organisers of the world largest maritime exercises Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) disinvited China in 2018 and China has declined to participate in RIMPAC ever since. Moreover, the 2022 drills themselves involved Quadrilateral security dialogue (Quad) and AUKUS participants – India, Japan, the USA, the UK, and Australia – and some of the major South China Sea dispute claimants (the Philippines). The drills officially did not target any potential adversary though the rationale was to get prepared for a future potential conflict. The 2022 US National Security Strategy named China ‘the only competitor’ to the US with an intent and capacity to reshape the international order. However, even given this cooling down of China’s relations with the West and growing China-US contradictions (especially visible in the cases of Taiwan and

“...Western sanctions galvanised Russia ... in this search for alternative global governance instruments, itself revealed as the hidden aspiration of many countries in Asia.”

technological ‘wars’) China’s intention to avoid any head-on collision with the US and its partners remained obvious.

Russia’s progressing relations with China was in sharp contrast to the continued deterioration of its relations with Japan and South Korea, both – participants in the Western sanctions regime against Russia. Shinzo Abe’s successors quickly nullified his efforts to develop normal relations with Russia. South Korean administrations undertook almost identical steps and like Japan stamped their own Individually Tailored Partnership Program with NATO at the Alliance’s July 2023 Summit in Vilnius. Against this background, there were a number of improvements in Russia’s relations with North Korea. In September 2023, Kim Jong Un visited Vladivostok, the capital of the Russian Far East. The next month Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov paid a visit to Pyongyang. Contacts between the military agencies of both countries resumed as well.

In 2023, India remained an important counterpart in Russia’s diplomatic efforts bilaterally and multilaterally. India’s G20 Chairmanship proved to be challenging because, despite the G20’s primary focus being the financial and economic dimensions

of the global governance system, its 2023 meeting became an important battleground for rising political controversies over the situation in Ukraine. As a motto for the 2023 G20 Summit’s Declaration, India proposed a unifying theme of ‘One Earth, One Family, One Future’ and endeavoured to keep the G20 focused on the issues of economic growth and sustainable global development. In the event, the Declaration recorded that the debate on the negative impact of the conflict in Ukraine on the global food and energy security, supply chains and macro-financial stability, displayed ‘different views and assessments of the situation’.

The 2023 Russia’s Foreign Policy Concept defined cooperation with China and India as strategically important. The Concept characterised both countries as ‘sovereign global centres of power in the Eurasian continent’ and echoed the aims of simultaneous cooperation with both partners set out in the 2021 Russian Strategy of National Security – the main Russian document outlining the key priorities in the national security sphere. Both documents stated that Russia-China-India interaction was an important element in building a non-block security system in the Asia-Pacific.

Due to Western sanctions, Russia’s economic relations with India received an unexpected impetus. Before 2022, it was a common knowledge that, while Russia and India engaged in multifaceted political dialogue, their economic ties lagged seriously behind. In 2022, Russia became India’s fifth largest trade partner, rising to fourth in 2023. This development potentially could become an important factor in bringing Russia and India closer economically while politically, especially at the regional level, the two countries might encounter increasingly divergent views. There are some areas in 2023 where

Russian and Indian assessments and aspirations differed and which required serious discussion and consideration by both partners. For example, both retained differing assessments of the Quad’s activities and of the Indo-Pacific construct. While India was trying to advocate its inclusive vision of the Indo-Pacific (despite little practical progress so far), Russian officials viewed the Indo-Pacific as primarily an instrument of US military and strategic policy in Asia.

Relations with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) remained vital for Russian diplomacy, with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov trying not to miss any high-level meeting organised by the Association and to reaffirm Russia’s commitment to the principle of ASEAN centrality in the regional institutional architecture. Thus, in 2023 he took part in the 56th ASEAN Foreign Ministers’ Meeting, the 42nd ASEAN Summit and the 18th East Asia Summit.

This year, the ASEAN-Russia Strategic Partnership turned five. Multiple new avenues of ASEAN-Russia interaction, including energy cooperation, infrastructure development, IT, digitalisation of education, joint responses to emergencies, opened new opportunities to further energise economic dynamism, capacity building in the security areas and technological exchange. In terms of security cooperation, the 2023 Joint Statement of ASEAN and Russian Foreign Ministers on the Occasion of the 5th Anniversary of ASEAN-Russia Strategic Partnership specifically mentioned joint counterterrorism efforts, the struggle with transnational crime and illicit drug trafficking, cooperation in the sphere of ICT security-related issues, along with agriculture and food security.

Viewing ASEAN-centric system of regional institutions, including the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Defense Ministerial Meeting with the Dialogue Partners (ADMM+), as inclusive and conducive for the region's progressive development, the 2023 Russian Foreign Policy Concept also spoke about challenges to the ASEAN-centric system of international cooperation in the Asia-Pacific.

While supporting inclusive areas of cooperation outlined in the 2019 ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, Russian foreign policy makers perceived the US/Australia/Japan concept of a 'free and open' Indo-Pacific as problematic and alarming. They continued to assess the Quad and AUKUS development (and especially the nuclear component of the former) as direct challenges to the ASEAN-centred inclusive regional security network. Such challenges, in Russia's official view, have already led to cleavages in the ASEAN-led mechanisms. For example, even though the 2023 EAS – chaired by Indonesia – was more successful than the 2022 event in terms of issuing a Leaders Statement, the Summit itself is still not functioning as an integrated platform for the macro-regional dialogue. A further example was Australia, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea and the US's boycott of the work of the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+) Experts' Working Group on Counter-Terrorism co-chaired by Russia and Myanmar since 2021.

At the same time, in 2023, ASEAN still managed to preserve its driving seat in these regional processes, curbing South China Sea territorial disputes and muddling through the rising geopolitical turbulence. A number of new developments occurred highlighting the opportunities for

Russia and ASEAN to cooperate in the areas of food and energy security as well as other humanitarian issues. Thus, for the first time ever on the sidelines of the 56th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting Russian, Chinese and Indonesian foreign ministers held trilateral consultations on the overall international situation, including food and energy security. In January 2023, Russia started its third mission in the Lao PDR on the mine clearing with both parties demonstrating strong progress in this area of cooperation.

Meanwhile some serious reconfigurations took place at the multilateral level beyond the Asia-Pacific region. During the 2023 SCO's virtual summit hosted by New Delhi, the SCO expanded to include Iran as a full member. The BRICS's Summit in Johannesburg (South Africa) announced expansion to include six new members, namely Argentina, Egypt, Iran, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Ethiopia. Remaining so far a dialogue platform rather than a fully institutionalised international entity, BRICS, nevertheless, began to consider ways to sustain its members' trade and development amid growing weaponisation of the Western-led international financial and economic institutions. Whether for bad or for good, mounting Western sanctions galvanised Russia into a real engine in this search for alternative global governance instruments, itself revealed as the hidden aspiration of many countries in Asia.

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European Union: From Ukraine to the Middle East, The Double Fragmentation of Asia

Alice Ekman

The world appears more than ever fragmented, looking at divergences in positioning on the long-lasting war in Ukraine, but also on the war that has emerged in the Middle East after Hamas' terrorist attack on Israel on 7 October 2023. These divergences are particularly noticeable among Asian countries. In Northeast Asia, while Japan, South Korea have been prompt in condemning Hamas attack, and to qualify it as terrorist, whereas North Korea and China have on the contrary been prompt in condemning Israel's response. These two groups of

countries already had diametrically opposed positions after Russia's invasion on Ukraine – while the former were prompt in condemning Russia and adopting sanctions, the latter never did.

In Southeast Asia, Singapore, the only ASEAN country that adopted sanctions against Russia after the invasion of Ukraine, has also been the country who has most clearly condemned Hamas' attacks, qualifying them as "terrorist". The city-state has been more vocal than

Asian countries who have been directly affected by Hamas' killing, such as Thailand (at least 32 Thai agricultural workers had been killed and at least 22 taken hostage, according to the Thai Foreign Ministry shortly after the attack). Like Thailand, many other ASEAN countries - including Vietnam, Philippines or Cambodia - issued statements that were quite muted. On the contrary, Malaysia and Indonesia, which do not have diplomatic relations with Israel, issued very strong statements.



18 March 2023. Sea of Oman. Naval forces of Iran, China and Russia wrap up their joint military exercises. Credit: Hossein Zohrevand.



EU STATEMENT AT THE UN SECURITY COUNCIL

Maintenance of Peace & Security of Ukraine

17 July 2023. New York, United States. Statement on behalf of the European Union and its Member States delivered by H.E. Ambassador Olof Skoog, Head of the Delegation of the European Union to the United Nations. Credit: EEAS.

Within the European Union, there is also clearly more convergence and unity on Ukraine, than we have seen so far on the Middle East – as has been shown in several UN General Assembly votes (on 26 October, 4 EU member states voted against and 8 voted in favor of resolution ES-10/21 ‘Protection of civilians and upholding legal and humanitarian obligations’, while 15 abstained). This being said, the divergences exist on the release of hostages, the timing and conditionality of humanitarian pauses and a potential cease-fire, as well as on how to provide more humanitarian relief until then, not on the 7th October attack itself, which has been unanimously condemned across EU Institutions and member states. On the very day of the attack, President of the European Commission Ursula Von der Leyer condemned the Hamas attack on Israel as ‘terrorism in its most despicable form’. On 12th November 2023, Josep Borrell

called on ‘Hamas to immediately & unconditionally release all hostages.’, and the 27 European Union nations jointly condemned Hamas for what they described as the use of hospitals and civilians as ‘human shields’ in the war against Israel. As the war continues, the EU institutions and a growing number of EU member states are also calling, to various degrees, for de-escalation, more humanitarian pauses and compliance with international humanitarian law. Divergences in the positions of member states remain.

The war between Israel and Hamas is of top concern for Europe, for both international and domestic reasons. First of all, several member states are directly concerned as a significant number of their citizens have been killed or taken hostage by Hamas.: this was the case for France, that had 40 of its citizens killed and 8 still being held hostage as of November 6th, according to the French Prime

Minister Elisabeth Borne. Secondly, the European Union and member states fear an escalation of the conflict that could involve more directly other regional players, including Iran, and would have devastating effects on the Middle East and -beyond.

Member states are also fearing the consequences of the conflict on their domestic security. The terrorist threat is already severe on the European continent. Terrorist attacks have taken place in France (a teacher was killed in the northern city of Arras on October 13) and in Belgium (two Swedish nationals were shot dead in Brussels on October 16), and alerts are now at the highest levels in other EU member states. The rise of antisemitism since October 7th has been exponential in several member states (1,500 antisemitic acts have been recorded in France between October 7th and mid-November, a three-fold increase over all of 2022). This rise of antisemitism is also

“Within the European Union, there is also clearly more convergence and unity on Ukraine, than we have seen so far on the Middle East...”

noticeable in parts of Asia, notably on Chinese and Indonesian traditional and social media.

Lastly, several EU member states are fearing destabilization operations on their national territories from third countries that would use the international situation to exacerbate further local tensions. This has already been the case in France. Several dozen Stars of David were found painted in different locations in Paris at the end of October. The French department responsible for vigilance and protection against foreign digital interference concluded that they were likely part of a destabilization operation tied to a pro-Russia businessman already present in the country. If confirmed, this operation would exemplify the intensification of the foreign interference and disinformation challenge, aiming at destabilizing several European countries – a challenge that the EU is already well-aware of and rapidly building up its capabilities to counter.

China-Russia and the consolidation of an ‘anti-Western’ coalition

The fragmentation is certainly not total. In Asia, some countries appear more vocal on one conflict than another. India, for instance, appears more willing to take a strong

stance on the war between Israel and Hamas (explicitly condemning Hamas’ attack and supporting Israel) than on the war on Ukraine, although this positioning is evolving. Several ASEAN countries also appear more vocal on the Middle East conflict than on Ukraine, a war that has been perceived by some Southeast Asian countries as far away, secondary to other global issues.

Overall, however, the fragmentation globally over these two ongoing wars is conspicuous. While some positions do not fully overlap, they are converging. This is certainly the case for the Chinese and Russian positions, which are aligned and coordinated at the United Nations. Both countries are calling for an immediate cease-fire, pushed common resolutions, and have vetoed the US push for UNSC action to support humanitarian pauses at the early stage of the fighting.

Beyond their expression at the UN, the positions of China and Russia on the Israel/Hamas war converge on one pivotal point: that the US – and the West in broader term, including the EU and its member states – bear primary responsibility for the situation. Two days after Hamas’ attack, Russia’s Ministry of Foreign affairs openly accused the US of a ‘destructive’ approach to the Israel-Palestinian war. China’s Ministry of Foreign affairs, for its part, has been more discreet, but alluded in several instances to the so-called responsibility of major powers. Informal discussion with think tank representatives confirm the general perception within the Chinese foreign policy making community that the United States and its allies are the main trouble-makers in the world. At the 10th Xiangshan Forum held in Beijing in October 2023, Chinese representatives inferred that the US and its allies could be

found behind all the crises in the world, and proposed the creation of a ‘regional security architecture in the Middle East’ to facilitate the dilution of Western influence on the region. Russia’s virulent anti-Western rhetoric – which was illustrated at the Xiangshan Forum by the speech of Defense Minister Shoigu, one of the guests of honor – is not seen as a problem in Beijing, which shares deep-down similar perceptions. China and North Korea are also converging on this perception. The two countries already had – and still have – compatible views of the war in Ukraine, which they attributed to NATO/Western provocations, while continuing to reinforce ties with their Russia partners – as confirmed by Kim’s week-long visit to Russia in September 2023, Vladimir Putin’s visit to Beijing in October 2023 on the occasion of the 3rd Belt & Road Forum, in addition to numerous ministerial-level visits and exchanges.

As the Middle East is now in crisis, there is no sign that any of these countries will adjust their position towards Iran, which they perceive as a strategic partner. China, Russia, and Iran have conducted joint military exercises in the Gulf of Oman in March 2023, and are likely to conduct others in the future. Iran has been sending military equipment to Russia (drones in particular) to support its war efforts against Ukraine, and may continue to do so in the future. China, as the main destination of Iran’s oil exports, would certainly have leverage to ‘pressure’ its partner, but there is no sign that it is inclined to do so. Similarly, there are no indications that China is willing to pressure Russia over its long-lasting war on Ukraine. China pushes hard for the formation of anti-Western coalitions that would coordinate positions on all international crises.

“The wars in Ukraine and in the Middle East have not diverted the EU from its aspirations to diversify its ties in Asia...”

The relationship between China and Russia continues to be closely monitored in Europe. Long seen as a simple ‘marriage of convenience’ dominated by pragmatic energy cooperation, the rapprochement between the two countries is being consolidated by a shared resentment against the US, NATO and the ‘West’ in general. The joint declarations made during the visit of Xi Jinping to Russia in March 2023 confirmed the orientations indicated in their February 2022 joint statement, and showed once more that the bilateral *rapprochement* has been planned by the authorities in a strategic and detailed manner, and is now being consolidated as a long-term commitment, independently of the evolution of the war in Ukraine. Although China and Russia are not allies by treaty, these documents and the recent military-to-military visits and exchanges between the two countries are formalising the China-Russia security partnership and their mutual support on specific issues, including Taiwan. The war in Ukraine has so far not reset the relationship. Significant imbalances exist between the two countries, not just in economic terms – they are the 2nd and 11th largest economies in the world – but also, and increasingly, in the diplomatic, technological, and military domains. But the China-Russia rapprochement is likely to keep on consolidating in the coming

years, as it is driven by a shared and strong resentment against the West as well as strong geopolitical ambitions to restructure global governance and norms towards a post-Western order.

The wars in Ukraine and in the Middle East have not diverted the EU from its aspirations 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 and which aims to mobilise up to €300 billion in investments by 2027. But in light of the existing urgencies and related fragmentation, the EU is prioritising cooperation with ‘like-minded’ partners in the region, such as Japan, South Korea and Australia. China is still perceived as an important economic partner and the EU-China relationship continues to be supported by numerous high-level visits and meetings, in preparation for the EU-China Summit to be held in December 2023, but what is seen in Brussels as uneven market access and unfair competition in key sectors (including electric vehicles) remain obstacles to re-boosting economic cooperation and putting EU-China relations on a more cooperative track. Most of all, persisting divergences on Ukraine, as well as emerging ones on Israel-Hamas, are likely to limit the outcomes of the upcoming summit. It is also unlikely that the EU will view China as a credible ‘mediator’ in these conflicts, considering Beijing’s recent declarations and positioning.

The upcoming multilateral gatherings will most likely underline the persistence of diverging views on the war in Ukraine, the emergence of equally diverging views on the war in Israel/Hamas, but also diverging hierarchies of priorities. The war in Ukraine remains, of course, at the top of the agenda of the European

Union and its member states, who have adopted several large-scale packages of energy and technological sanctions against Russia since its invasion of Ukraine on 24th February 2022, and continue to strongly support Kiev through various means, including the delivery of European weapons to the war zone (despite the relative failure of Ukraine’s military counter-offensive). For the EU, the key objective is to both address the conflict in the Middle East and keep the war in Ukraine at the top of the multilateral agenda. Other countries, including China and Russia, will seek to push the Ukraine question to the side as much as possible. The multilateral cacophony that we have witnessed over the last two years, leading to tensions from the very early stage of preparation for critical summit meetings through to their conclusion is likely to intensify, while wars continue.

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Canada: Relevance or Idealism? Foreign Policy at Critical Juncture

Stephen Nagy

It has been a year since the Trudeau government released its Indo-Pacific Strategy (CIPS) on 27th November 2022. The strategy has five interconnected strategic objectives: 1) Promote peace, resilience, and security; 2) Expand trade, investment, and supply chain resilience; 3) Invest in and connect people; 4) Build a sustainable and green future; and 5) Canada as an active and engaged partner to the Indo-Pacific.

The five interconnected strategic objectives are seen to reflect the government's domestic priorities including, indigenous reconciliation, the environment, and the promotion

of progressive interpretations of diversity issues. The challenges presented by authoritarian states such as China and Russia to the rules-based order, the spread of weapons of mass destruction, and the importance of diversification of trade and supply chains are also key features of the strategy.

We see these domestic priorities reflected in addressing injustices to First Nation peoples in the Indo-Pacific. To illustrate, CIPS aims to support the economic empowerment of Indigenous Peoples through the implementation of the Indigenous Peoples Economic and

Trade Cooperation Arrangement (IPETCA) in cooperation with existing partners—Australia, New Zealand, and Taiwan—and Indigenous Peoples from those participating economies. Canada is creating new formulas for minilateral cooperation with like-minded partners to address domestic and Indo-Pacific indigenous peoples' developmental challenges and injustices. This includes the Pacific Islands, who faced a legacy of colonial neglect of their indigenous people but also existential environmental challenges.

CIPS envisions reconciliation with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis

6 September 2023. Jakarta, Indonesia. ASEAN-Canada Leaders' Summit. Credit: ASEAN 2023.



peoples through enhanced indigenous exchanges with regional partners and will support education and skills development for indigenous youth, continue the implementation of the IPETCA, and support the implementation of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. These CIPS initiatives highlight Canada's commitment to international institutions and the rules they have agreed upon; a rules-based order.

Placing an importance on diversity in governance, business, and society, the CIPS has outlined its commitment to enhanced support to women entrepreneurs to maximise opportunities in the Indo-Pacific by expanding international partnerships through the Women Entrepreneurship Strategy. It has also committed to increasing feminist international assistance programming based on partner needs and helping to protect the most vulnerable populations and support work to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. Furthermore, CIPS support efforts toward democracy, inclusivity, accountable governance, and sustained economic growth, helping key countries in the region and working with development partners to reduce inequality and contribute to their economic prosperity.

While laudable at home, Canadian Indo-Pacific watchers of the CIPS have mixed views about the aforementioned elements of the strategy and how it is currently conceived. On a positive note, they welcome this once in a generation strategy that resets Canada's foreign policy priorities. By clearly recognising the economic opportunities that the Indo-Pacific region has and the importance of inculcating Canada into the region's rule-making processes, the strategy ensures that Canada is at the table, not on the menu when it comes to the region's development.



29 July 2023. Australia. HMCS *Montréal* alongside Cairns before sailing to take part in Exercise Talisman Sabre 2023. Credit: ANI.

Importantly, the government has secured CAN \$2.3 billion over the next 5 years to realise CIPS. This initial budget is what Foreign Minister Melanie Jolie has articulated is a down payment for a bigger ten-year commitment to the region.

This is where the praise comes to an end. Concerns about CIPS and Canadian foreign policy in general is that its position globally is in crisis, its credibility under question, and its strategy ill-suited for US-China strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific region.

Analysts in the security community are articulating the need for a sober assessment of Canadian national interests, its foreign policy approach, and a serious rethink of Canada's place in the world with comparatively limited resources.

They argue that intentionally or not, Canada has manoeuvred itself into fraught relations with key countries in the Indo-Pacific, India and China. An additional criticism is that hitherto successive Canadian governments made the error of seeing the Indo-Pacific/Asia-Pacific region through a

China-centred rather than regionwide lens and that its CIPS is now overly focusing on ASEAN as the platform for creating a sustained Canadian footprint in the region.

In the case of Canada-Indian relations, the recent accusations towards the Indian Government about direct involvement in the killing of a Canadian citizen of Indian origin has shaken Ottawa's foreign policy engagement with New Delhi. Canada is now faced with the unenviable conundrum of how to implement its new Canada Indo-Pacific Strategy when relations with India are at record lows.

CIPS envisions Canada expanding its trade footprint within the Indo-Pacific region with an FTA with India to selectively diversify Canadian investments away from an increasingly disruptive China. With trade negotiations suspended following these assassination accusations, it is difficult to foresee a trade deal coming to fruition any time soon. It will also complicate Canada being able to find a place at the table of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue

“Concerns about... Canadian foreign policy in general is that its position globally is in crisis, its credibility under question, and its strategy ill-suited for US-China strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific region.”

(Quad), a minilateral that is gaining increased currency in the region for its efforts to contribute public goods to the region.

Canada-China relations are hardly in a better position. The hostage diplomacy that was practiced following the arrest of the Huawei executive Ms Meng Wanzhou, political interference allegations and threats to Canadian parliamentarians along with sanctions on Canadian products coming into China have painfully demonstrated that Canada’s long-term engagement with China was vulnerable to the weaponisation of supply chains, visiting scholars and businesspeople amongst other forms of coercion.

Relations with China remain frozen at the diplomatic level. Notwithstanding, we have witnessed an increasing number of dangerous manoeuvres by PLA naval and airships towards Canadian counterparts in the Taiwan Strait as Ottawa attempts to support the right to fly and sail in international waters.

Canada-ASEAN relations are mixed. Efforts to work towards a Canada-ASEAN FTA will be challenged by ASEAN’s heterogeneity and continued conflict in Myanmar. China’s structural slowdown will no doubt

impact the region’s growth prospects raising questions as to whether overly prioritising ASEAN as a trade partner is a prudent choice in selectively diversifying away from China.

Despite these criticisms, the appointments of former Assistant Deputy Minister, Asia Pacific, Paul Thoppil as Indo-Pacific Trade Ambassador to spearhead Canada’s trade engagement in the region and *Ian G. McKay*, Ambassador of Canada to Japan and Special Envoy for the *Indo-Pacific* are seen as strong indications of Canada’s willingness to deploy experienced diplomats and bureaucrats to the region to build a sustainable and meaningful Canadian engagement in the Indo-Pacific.

Increasingly, many view Canada’s middle power identity, one that advocates for human rights, international law, human security – so-called normative paradigms – has resulted in isolation and questions over the relevance of Canada to our traditional allies. It has raised questions about Canada’s ability to contribute to global governance and mitigating challenges such as non-traditional and traditional security challenges in the Indo-Pacific, the Middle East and in war zones such as the Ukraine and now the Middle East following Hamas’ terrorist attack on Israel.

This isolation and questions over relevance and reliability is well illustrated by Canada not being a second, or even a third choice for the Quad, AUKUS and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF).

Even the muted silence following the assassination of a Canadian citizen on Canadian soil by the Five Eyes members suggests that Canada is not seen as a priority partner in dealing with 21st century great power politics and the challenges associated with the US-China relationship but also Russia.

From former diplomats to practicing security researchers, the common lament is that Canada requires an earnest assessment of its resources, its place in the world, and its traditional middle power identity that was founded on a value-based approach to Canada engaging regionally and globally.

There is growing consensus that to be an effective, sustainable, and meaningful partner to our like-minded fraternity like the United States, Japan, South Korea, Australia and European states, an interest-based approach to middle power engagement will be critical to manage and secure our strategic autonomy and reliability within minilateral relationships such as the Quad, AUKUS, etc.

This middle power reset is a choice between relevance as a diplomatic actor on the international stage or middle power idealism leading to a diminished place in the world and an inability to secure Canadian national interests.

As part of this shift, many argue that Canada needs to jettison evangelistic approaches to foreign policy that focus on human rights, democracy promotion and cultural issues in lieu

“Canada’s involvement in traditional security issues in the Indo-Pacific, the Ukraine, and the Middle East need a frank assessment of the realities of the resources that we can bring to bear to these regions.”

of a foreign policy deeply wedded to securing Canadian national interests in respective regions globally.

In the context of the Indo-Pacific, Canada's national interests are at least threefold. First, locking us into the rulemaking process of this rapidly evolving region. This means being part of trade agreements like the CPTPP, trade frameworks such as IPEF, the regulation of AI and developing the technologies that will transform economies, the relationships between government and its citizens as well as the promotion of good governance.

Without being at the rules-setting table in the region and part of major trade agreements, Canada will not be able to deliver prosperity to Canadians.

Second, Canada has a vested interests in contributing to mitigating non-traditional security challenges such as climate change, transnational diseases, transnational illegal migration, piracy and cybersecurity challenges that are emanating from outlier states such as North Korea. These non-traditional security challenges also emanate from revisionist states, terrorist groups and non-state actors that deploy disinformation proactively to sow discord, divide and to co-opt our democratic form of government and breakdown our rule-of law based system.

At the forefront of these challenges we have China and Russia.

Third, traditional security is also a critical area for Canada, and it's needed middle power reset in the Indo-Pacific. Sea lines of communication (SLOC) and airways are all being challenged by revisionist states. Illegal entry into Air Defense Identification Zones (ADIZ), unsafe naval and air manoeuvres, and the use of grey zone and lawfare tactics are elevating the chance for conflict in the South China

Sea, East China Sea and across the Taiwan Straits.

This could disrupt the more than the USD \$5.5 trillion of imports/ exports and energy resources that flow through the SLOC in the Indo-Pacific not to mention damage the economic power houses in the region.

Canada's involvement in traditional security issues in the Indo-Pacific, the Ukraine, and the Middle East need a frank assessment of the realities of the resources that we can bring to bear to these regions.

Key questions that need to be addressed include how sustainable the provision of military resources to zones of conflict or instability is and if there are other means to provide capabilities to deal with security challenges in these regions?

Here, Canada has a demonstrated track record of working within NORAD, NATO and the NEON Operations in the Sea of Japan. These act as tools to enforce UN mandated sanctions evasion policies against North Korea. These operations also demonstrate that Canada's contributions to regional security challenges can be through UN mandated activities, cooperation with like-minded states or through the delivery of specific capabilities.

To illustrate, The Philippines signed an arrangement with Canada on the use of the latter's Dark Vessel Detection System (DVD) by the Philippine National Coast Watch Center (NCWC) against illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing in the country's exclusive economic zone.

Canada simply does not have the resources to manage a large military footprint in the Indo-Pacific, the Atlantic and a growing zone of threat in the Arctic. A capabilities-based approach to adding value to the Indo-Pacific region's security challenges

will necessarily mean participating as a plugin or secondary partner into existing unilateral relationships. Key examples are the Quad and AUKUS as well as emerging unilateral relationships such as the Japan-ROK-US Camp David Principles-based unilateral or others.

As Canada reflects on how to manage the geopolitical realities of the US-China Strategic competition it will be critically important to work with partners and allies to lobby, insulate and influence an increasingly politically unstable United States such that their foreign policy reflects the interests of partners and allies of the United States. Key partners will include Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, European countries, as well as others.

In dealing with China, and the growing track record of economic coercion, hostage diplomacy, disinformation and political influence tactics Canada will have to expand its cooperation with like-minded countries to insulate itself from the weaponisation of trade, supply chains, education, exchanges, etc.

At the same time, effective engagement with China will require a more disciplined, nuanced and interest-based approach to securing the real benefits that would flow from a strong, robust trade relationship but a relationship that is balanced and well diversified within the broader Indo-Pacific region.

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AUSTRALIA: Accord and Discord in the Security Policy Community

Gareth Evans

There is little disagreement within the Australian policy community that the Asia-Pacific/Indo-Pacific regional security environment in 2024 and beyond will continue to be fragile and volatile; that negotiating a course between the two neighbourhood giants, China and the United States – our major economic partner and security ally respectively – will continue to be our most formidable international challenge; and that the situation demands a defence and foreign policy response that is better resourced than has been the case in more complacent decades past.

But that is about as far as agreement currently goes – within the Albanese Government, between Government and Opposition, and within the wider think tank, academic and media policy community. The change of government in 2022 has brought a much more measured tone to the China debate, with less of the crude hyperbole of the previous five years that contributed so much to the deterioration of the bilateral relationship. But significant differences are still very much evident, and in many ways growing, as to the extent and imminence of the security threat posed by China under Xi Jinping; the wisdom of further deepening Australia's alliance dependence on the United States; how we should be prioritising our defence preparedness; and how much weight we should be giving to diplomacy over defence.



2 Jun 2023. Singapore. Prime Minister Anthony Albanese opens the Shangri-La Dialogue.
Credit: IISS Shangri-La Dialogue.

Common Ground

The security concerns that *are* broadly shared across the Australian policy community are familiar enough, broadly shared as they also are across most of our wider region, including within the CSCAP community. In the case of China, concerns extend to its international law-defying territorial ambition in, and militarisation of, the South China Sea, with its '9-dash line' this year expanded to 10; its repeatedly stated determination to unify Taiwan with the mainland, not excluding the use of force, in a context where its repressive actions in Hong Kong have made reunification on a 'one country, two systems' basis a nonstarter; its continued assertiveness on other territorial fronts with Japan and India; its efforts to increase its presence and influence in smaller but strategically significant regional players, including the Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea and Timor Leste; and its transition from a bystander to regular spoiler role in the United Nations Security Council and other multilateral contexts. Above all,

there is anxiety – compounded by Beijing's manifest determination to challenge the nature and extent of the US security presence in the region – about the very significant expansion and modernisation of its military, including nuclear, capability.

In the case of the United States, the increasingly alarming vagaries of its domestic politics have created

“the alarming vagaries of [US] its domestic politics have created concerns across the board ... about its will and capacity to stay the course in its long self-appointed role as regional security stabiliser and balancer”



21 July 2023. Sydney, Australia. Exercise Talisman Sabre 23 Opening Ceremony onboard HMAS Canberra in Sydney. Credit: Department of Defence.

concerns across the board – not entirely confined to Washington’s allies and partners – about its will and capacity to stay the course in its long self-appointed role as regional security stabiliser and balancer, particularly given its distractions elsewhere with Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and now again in the Middle East; also about its retreat from the open trading policies that have contributed so much to the region’s economic prosperity, and consequent stability. Concerns about US reliability have particular resonance in the context of North East Asia, where the DPRK continues to expand its nuclear arsenal and engage in other military provocations; where neither Seoul’s new government nor Washington have shown any interest in diplomatic concessions that might restart negotiations over nuclear risk reduction; and where the ROK (and even Japan, though to a much lesser extent) has made clear that acquiring its own nuclear deterrent remains a serious option. Conflict between India and Pakistan, the Indo-Pacific’s other perennial security flashpoint, is not imminently likely, but can never be entirely ruled out, given the Modi Governments demonstrated capacity to inflame anti-Muslim religious sentiment and the track record

of Pakistan’s military-dominated government in accommodating and inflaming extremist religio-nationalist sentiment of its own.

The unhappy reality – and this perception is, again, shared across most of the Australian policy community, as around the region – is that nations can sleep-walk into war, even when rational, objective self-interest on all sides cries out against it. Bellicose nationalist rhetoric, designed mainly for domestic political consumption, can generate over-reactions elsewhere. Small provocations, economic or otherwise, can generate an escalating cycle of larger reactions. Precautionary defence spending can escalate into a full-blown arms race. With more nervous fingers on more triggers, small incidents can rapidly escalate into major crises. And major crises can explode into all-out war – creating, in this nuclear age, existential risks not only for its participants but for life on this planet as we know it.

All these shared concerns translate into a degree of agreement – but only a degree – across the Australian policy community as to what our defence and foreign policy response should be.

First, accepting that defence preparedness should be governed by potential adversaries’ capability rather than their perceived hostile intent, there is a general recognition that Australia will need – whatever the state of our US alliance – to spend more on building our own military self-reliance. But how much more, and on what assets, remains contested. The *Defence Strategic Review* initiated by the Albanese Government, authored by former defence chief Angus Houston and defence minister Stephen Smith, and released in April 2023, began – but by no means completed – the task of defining the kind of expanded and refigured capability Australia will need in response to what it described as ‘the most challenging circumstances in our region for decades’. The review focused on the need to build longer-range ‘defence by denial’ capability, with less emphasis on land warfare, vulnerable surface ships and defence of the continent, and more on distant forward defence through enhanced air, underwater and cyber firepower. There is little disagreement about the need for the Australian defence porcupine (or, in our case, echidna) to have more

“there remains ... much that is highly contested within the [Australian] security policy community, [including on the] fundamental issues of how we should be positioning ourselves in relation to China, the United States and – in that context – our defence preparedness.”

and sharper quills. But there is still a real issue as to just how long and strong and unequivocally self-managed some of those quills really need to be – above all the nuclear-powered submarines promised by AUKUS, further discussed below. And there is still plenty of scepticism – historically well-founded – as to whether we are really prepared to pay for needed new capability, and able to deliver it with any timeliness.

Second, it is broadly uncontested that we need to spend more diplomatic time and attention consolidating, building, or rebuilding as the case may be, bilateral relationships around the region with key regional neighbours, especially Indonesia, but also Vietnam, our FPDA partners Malaysia and Singapore, and Japan, South Korea and India. And also in the Pacific, where the previous Coalition Government's largely denialist climate policy has been a significant turn-off for our island friends in recent years. New Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, and particularly Foreign Minister Penny Wong, have received deserved praise for their sustained personal commitment in this respect. The ASEAN-centred regional dialogue architecture – EAS, ARF and all the rest – remains, properly, an important focus, but there is a degree of scepticism as to just how much time and attention we should be devoting to ASEAN itself, as a collective organisation. ASEAN continues to be a supremely important de-fuser of cross-border tensions, making violent conflict between its members, so common in the past, now unthinkable, but has proved frustratingly incapable of helping redress catastrophic human rights violations in some of its member states, above all Myanmar, or offering any kind of collective resistance to overweening behaviour by China.

It is also well understood and accepted that giving new substantive ballast and substance to some of these

crucial, but so far underdone, regional bilateral relationships will require much more creative energy going into building trade and investment ties, and also more generous and focused aid programs for those countries still needing such support. A good start on the former front has been made with the publication in September 2023 of the Moore report, *Invested: Australia's Southeast Asia Economic Strategy to 2040*. This report's laser-like focus, not on generalities but particular sectors and sub-regions, follows in this respect the equally impressive 2018 Varghese report, *An India Economic Strategy to 2035*. On the aid side, while new commitments, focusing very much on the Pacific, were announced in August this year, as part of a thoughtful new policy document, *Australia's International Development Policy*, the total Australian spend has been falling dramatically in recent years. With ODA at just 0.19 per cent of GNI, we are now among the least generous of OECD donors – and badly need to reverse that trend if we are to have any serious credentials as a good international citizen.

Third, although it has its critics on the fringes, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue – bringing together the US, Japan, India and Australia – continues, since its revival in 2017, to command quite strong support across the Australian security policy community, albeit more for its optics than any real military substance, joint naval exercises notwithstanding. While the Quad is unlikely to evolve into a fully-fledged military alliance, not least because of India's inhibitions about so positioning itself, the new grouping has great combined military clout, and simply by its existence sends a very clear signal to Beijing that any significant further adventurism in the region may be met by a more muscular and united push-back than it would like. Recent moves to give the Quad a greater non-military

“Many of us are hoping that diplomacy will no longer be confined to a second fiddle role and that Australia will again play the creative and constructive middle power role we have in the past...”

focus, with cooperative initiatives on health security, clean energy, regional connectivity and the like, should contribute usefully to its longevity.

Contested ground

As encouraging as all this more or less common ground may be, the reality is that there remains in Australia much that is highly contested within the security policy community, going to the three quite fundamental issues of how we should be positioning ourselves in relation to China, the United States and – in that context – our defence preparedness. In each case the division can be broadly – but crudely, because of course there are exceptions in both camps – put this way. On one side, there is the defence and intelligence community and those think-tanks and media who sail with it – above all the largely Defence-funded Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), the Murdoch press *passim*, and a strident section of the Age/Sydney Morning Herald *Nine* media empire – who tend to a pessimistic view of the threat environment and a disposition to approach most problem-solving through a primarily military lens. On the other side, there is the foreign policy constellation of current and former diplomats, and academic, think-tank and media analysts and commentators (including me), who

tend to be more optimistic about the possibility of peaceful solutions and more willing to champion diplomacy, dialogue and cooperation as the path to them.

This divide remains very pronounced in the case of China. Since the change of government, Prime Minister Albanese and Foreign Minister Wong have been keen to downplay the all too common talk under their predecessors about ‘drums of war’ beating. Wong’s speech to the National Press Club in April 2023 clearly spelt out the new tone when she said that we should ‘not waste energy with shock or outrage’ at China using its great and growing strength and international influence to advance its national interests, but rather ‘cooperate where we can, disagree where we must, [and] manage our differences wisely’. And Albanese has made clear in multiple statements through the course of the year – including at the Shangri-la Dialogue in Singapore, the East Asian Summit and the G20 meeting – his own strong commitment in this context to dialogue and diplomacy, to cooperation rather than confrontation. All that was clearly bearing fruit with a very visible warming of bilateral relations toward the end of 2023, with its centrepiece a prime ministerial visit to Beijing in November to mark the 50th anniversary of Gough Whitlam’s ice-breaking.

But that softer tone has not found much favour with many in the defence and intelligence community, who continue to fulminate privately, and occasionally publicly (as with Defence Industry Minister Conroy raging against ‘appeasers’ in the context of the AUKUS debate at the ALP National Conference in August 2023, and ASIO head Mike Burgess in October 2023 blasting Chinese intellectual property theft as the worst ‘in human history’) about the scale of China’s military buildup,

the imminence of the military threat it poses to Taiwan, the reality of its determination to build Pacific bases potentially threatening Australia, the state-capture risks of its Belt and Road Initiative, the perfidy of its industrial espionage, and the alarming extent of its influence operations, not least within its now very large Australian diaspora. All this is regularly fuelled by alarmist statements from the Coalition opposition, who have made a meal, historically, of claiming Labor to be soft on communism and weak on defence. Tension within the government is well contained for now, but remains capable of boiling up at any time.

Tension is also present, and growing, on the question of Australia’s relationship with the United States. There is no serious inclination anywhere to walk away from the ANZUS alliance, with a general recognition of the benefits we continue to derive from access to intelligence, high-end weaponry and technology (with the second tranche of AUKUS, going to cooperation on AI, electronic warfare, hypersonic and underwater capabilities and the like, seen as particularly significant in this respect), and the deterrent utility of the prospect – not guaranteed, but not to be ignored – of the US coming to our defence if attacked. But beyond that the ground is indeed contested. There are those who are true believers in the moral exceptionalism of the United States, the indispensability of its continued economic and military primacy in maintaining both global and regional peace and good order, and the certainty of its military commitment to Australia’s defence, and who are prepared to follow it down almost any path it should take. There are many in the Australian security policy community who are much more sceptical on all these fronts. And there are those

who strive to keep a foot in both camps. While the Coalition parties remain more or less unanimous true believers, pretty much the full response spectrum is evident within the Albanese Government. Defence Minister Richard Marles is closest to a true believer. Prime Minister Albanese, while comfortable enough talking Washington talk – not least on state visits, like that very seamlessly carried out in October 2023 – is an instinctive straddler. And Foreign Minister Penny Wong, while always cautious, is more inclined to scepticism, particularly on the attractions of continued US primacy, being very explicit in her April 2023 National Press Club speech about Australia’s national interest lying, above all, in our living in a *multipolar* region, one ‘where no country dominates, and no country is dominated ... and all countries benefit from strategic equilibrium’.

A cutting-edge issue – though one on which the commentariat is much more inclined to be frank than any politician – is whether the US will really feel obliged to rush to our military defence if we are ever seriously threatened, or only do so if its own national interests are also directly at stake. There is a particularly strong case for scepticism in the case of our reliance not just on US extended deterrence, but extended *nuclear* deterrence: it defies credibility to think that Washington would risk losing Los Angeles to save Sydney, or for that matter Seoul or Tokyo. And scepticism on all these fronts will certainly accelerate in the unhappy event of Donald Trump, who clearly regards allies as encumbrances more than assets, regaining the presidency.

One context in which alliance-related tension could clearly explode is if China were to attack Taiwan. This is not inconceivable, although much of the current speculation about



29 July 2023. Coral Sea. Exercise Talisman Sabre - USS *America* (LHA 6) HMAS *Adelaide* (L01), JS *Izumo* (DDH 183), ROKN *Marado* (LPH 6112), USS *Green Bay* (LPD 20), USS *New Orleans* (LPD 18), HMAS *Choules* (L100), ROKN *Munmu The Great* (DDH 976), USS *Rafael Peralta* (DDG 115), USNS *Matthew Perry* (T-AKE-9), JS *Shimokita* (LST 4002), HMAS *Stalwart* and USNS *Tippecanoe* (T-AO 199).
Credit: USN Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Thomas B. Contant.

Beijing taking military advantage of Washington's preoccupation with Russia in Ukraine, and now again the Middle East, seems wildly overdrawn. China's long-term ambition to regain Taiwan is clear, but the downside risks of taking precipitate and unprovoked strike action – for both its internal prosperity and stability, and its wider international reputation – would seem to outweigh any possible rewards. That said, the prospect of an invasion – however remote – will continue to divide Australian opinion. Echoing a statement from then US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage twenty years earlier, Peter Dutton – then Coalition Defence Minister and now Opposition leader – said in 2021 that it was 'inconceivable that we wouldn't support the US' in any military action it chose to take. Defence Minister Marles made clear his own view in October 2023 that Australia 'cannot be a passive

bystander in the event of war'. But there is a strong view within a large section of the ALP that if it did come to a fight, and one unprovoked by Taiwan, while it would be a tough call not to join in the defence of a fellow thriving democracy, that siren call should be resisted. The argument is that Taiwan has always been a special case, its sovereignty never recognised internationally in the same way as Kuwait's or Ukraine's, and that Australia has little or no capacity to influence the outcome, but a great capacity to suffer if drawn into war at any level.

The biggest defence issue of all currently testing the solidarity of the Australian security policy community, and likely to do so for years to come, is the desirability, and credibility, of Australia acquiring a fleet of eight or more nuclear propelled submarines, under the AUKUS

agreement with the United States and United Kingdom. Signed by the Morrison Coalition Government in 2021, and embraced without any evident reluctance by the Albanese Government in 2022, the agreement has come under fire domestically for three main reasons. The first, which also has had some international buy-in in the neighbourhood and beyond, goes to its implications for nuclear non-proliferation, and is the most easily answerable. The boats will not be nuclear-armed; their propulsion units will be lifetime-sealed, requiring no refuelling or any Australian production of possibly divertible fissile material; and IAEA negotiations to establish effective new safeguards protocols seem close to conclusion.

A much more compelling domestic criticism, taking into account the eye-watering estimated cost of up to \$A368 billion over the next 30 years

of the proposed SSN program, the gravity defying delivery timetable (the early 2030s for the first US boat, a decade later for the first new jointly designed and built boat, and sometime in the 2050s for the last... if all goes to plan), is whether these boats, for all the undeniable advantages over conventionally powered boats they bring in range, speed, endurance underwater, firepower and (for now, anyway) undetectability, they really are the optimal choice for Australia's defence needs. Would not we be better served by spending the same or less money on getting, much sooner, a much larger fleet of conventional boats, many more of which could be simultaneously at sea, and which may well – with expected advances in detection capability over the next few decades – be no more vulnerable than the SSNs? If the role of the AUKUS boats is to be a useful, albeit numerically marginal, add-on to US underwater capability in the South China Sea, they can no doubt play that part well. But if their primary purpose is to protect continental Australia, and our Indo-Pacific sea-lanes and communication systems, from attack, could we not be as well or better served by a larger, much earlier deployed, conventional fleet? How much value is really added, here as elsewhere, by moving from a posture of defence of our continent and archipelagic surrounds to one of distant forward defence? These questions remain basically unanswered.

The remaining big concern about the AUKUS project, increasingly being articulated at least within the more sceptical end of the policy community here, is whether by so comprehensively further yoking ourselves to such extraordinarily sophisticated and sensitive US military technology, Australia has for all practical purposes abandoned our

capacity for independent sovereign judgement. Not only as to how we use this new capability, but in how we respond to future US calls for military support. The government response is that an Australian flag means just that, and that we will retain complete operational independence in the use of these boats, whatever the context. But my own experience as Foreign Minister tells me that is not quite the way the world – and American pressure – works. Does anyone really think that a US Congress anxious about depleting US combat capability can be persuaded to exempt Australia from its International Traffic in Arms Regulations (ITAR) if it does not believe that the nuclear powered submarines it sells us will be on call at the click of a presidential finger if the Americans ever believe they need them?

These criticisms going to the desirability of the AUKUS submarine program may well be subsumed by rapidly growing concerns about its basic credibility, now coming from all sides, including – interestingly – some of its most fierce and longstanding supporters. There is now very real doubt as to whether the US Congress, in its present mood, will ever support the sales of three – let alone a possible five – Vanguard submarines to Australia or anyone else. And, given the history of all three countries in meeting design-and-build targets for complex new defence assets, and there are few if any more complex than nuclear submarines, anyone who thinks the second phase of this project has any more chance of proceeding smoothly to completion has not been concentrating. Even former Coalition Foreign Minister Alexander Downer, famously defensive of all things South Australian, described in October 2023 the idea of building new generation submarines in Adelaide as a financially untenable 'fairytale'. And the unhappy reality is that if the

whole AUKUS project falls over, as it well might in the next year or two, we have no obvious fallback Plan B.

Such, many of us would argue, are the consequences of allowing essentially free rein in security policymaking to hardliners in the defence and intelligence community, as has essentially been the case in Australia for most of the last three decades. Many of us are hoping that diplomacy will no longer be confined to a second fiddle role, that the kind of extraordinarily productive cooperative relationship between Defence, Foreign Affairs and the intelligence agencies that existed for most of the Hawke-Keating Government years can be recreated, and that Australia will again play the creative and constructive middle power role we have in past on both regional and global security issues. But we are not holding our breath.

Gareth Evans

Australian Foreign Minister 1988-96, President of the Brussels-based International Crisis Group 2000-09, and Chancellor of the Australian National University 2010-19, where he is now Distinguished Honorary Professor.

South Korea: What the ‘Washington Declaration’ Means for Korea and the Regional Order

Jun Jaewoo

In the past year alone, North Korea has conducted more than 70 missile launches. In September of last year, North Korea codified its policy on the use of nuclear weapons into law and, this year, incorporated this posture in its constitution. In a similar vein, in December 2022, the 6th Plenary Session of the 8th Central Committee of the Workers’ Party of North Korea identified South Korea as a ‘clear enemy’ and stressed that the strengthening of its nuclear arsenals was a key part of its ‘2023 Transformative Strategy for Nuclear Power and National Defense Development’.

In response to these blunt developments, President Biden and President Yoon agreed at the ASEAN East Asia Summit in Cambodia in November 2022 to formalise reactive tabletop exercises (TTX). And in April 2023, the two presidents issued the Washington Declaration which announced the establishment of a Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG) and the development of a Tailored Deterrence Strategy. The specific framework and content of these enhancements to joint consideration of how to respond to North Korea’s more open nuclear threats have yet to emerge. Although it is difficult at

this early stage to offer an assessment of what it will all mean for the future of Korea and the regional order, it is possible to examine the facts and implications of some of the issues that have already been raised.

First, there is a disagreement between the United States and South Korea over whether the ‘Washington Declaration’ constitutes de facto nuclear sharing between the two countries. President Yoon stated that the Washington Declaration dramatically enhanced the extended deterrence capability of US nuclear assets, elevating the alliance to a



16 March 2023. Pyongyang, North Korea. ICBM in a launching drill. Credit: KCNA.

“While it is unclear what ‘de facto nuclear sharing’ the South Korean leadership is referring to...”

‘nuclear-based alliance’. Kim Tae-hyo, First Deputy Director of the National Security Office, has said that ‘the two countries have established information sharing and joint planning mechanisms for US nuclear operations, and that South Koreans will feel that they are, in effect, sharing nuclear weapons with the United States.’

However, Edgard Kagan, the senior director for East Asia and Oceania at the White House National Security Council, immediately and directly dismissed these statements. Instead, he stated that the focus of the ‘Washington Declaration’ is to consult more with South Korea, share more information, have more sensitive discussions, and increase the visibility of US strategic assets around the Korean Peninsula. In other words, the US appears to disagree with South Korea’s claim that the NCG is in the nature of a ‘joint planning’ of US nuclear weapons use.

For South Korea’s claim to be true, the US would need to be able to provide details through the NCG on how it would allow or share the use of nuclear weapons with the South Korean military, which has no conceptual framework or strategy for operating nuclear weapons or even for being associated with them. For example, some North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) members have their own aircraft capable of delivering US B-61 variable-yield tactical nuclear weapons. NATO addressed this issue on several

occasions over the postwar period, and on every occasion found it difficult to achieve a stable mutual understanding. A major complication is that both the nuclear and non-nuclear parties have stringent obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. It is therefore hardly surprising that the nature of any South Korean role in US nuclear operations remains unclear.

While it is unclear what ‘de facto nuclear sharing’ the South Korean leadership is referring to, it would probably be unwise to regard the experience in NATO as a stepping stone to what may be taking shape in the ROK-US alliance. In fact, even in terms of security agreements, the 1949 North Atlantic Treaty Organization agreement includes language stating that an armed attack against one or more European or North American member countries would be considered an attack against all NATO countries. However, the US has not included such precise and unambiguous language in any subsequent security agreement with any country. Instead, the US-South Korea Mutual Defense Treaty includes language about constitutional procedures in both countries.

There is no precedent for a political declaration to put nuclear and non-nuclear states on an equal footing. Given that nuclear strategy is entirely determined by the nuclear powers, and nuclear powers deploy nuclear forces based on their own judgment of the threat, the NCG could be interpreted as a literal ‘consultation’ rather than a ‘joint plan,’ or as a ‘role sharing’ arrangement in which the United States’ nuclear strategy is complemented by South Korea’s formidable conventional weapons system.

Second, and for this very reason, it is necessary to examine the latest US statements on nuclear strategy and consider whether these played into the Washington Declaration in any way. President Yoon has repeatedly emphasised the Tailored Deterrence Strategy proposed in the US Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) last October. As an extension of this, during his summit with US President Biden, President Yoon highlighted the establishment of the ROK-US NCG and presented the so-called ‘Washington Declaration,’ as expanding the scope and mission of the ROK-US security relationship beyond the Korean Peninsula into a comprehensive global strategic alliance. In contrast, however, the Biden administration’s strategic documents last year, including NSS, NDS, and NPR retained the familiar focus on China and Russia as America’s primary concerns, with only a line or two about the DPRK. Indeed, a notable feature of the most recent NPR was its stronger emphasis on preventing the further proliferation of nuclear weapons and related technologies.

In fact, of course, the Washington Declaration was intended to help defuse the significant domestic support that had arisen for an indigenous South Korean nuclear weapons program. Instead, an official press release from the ROK Ministry of National Defense regarding the outcome of the 23rd ROK-US Integrated Defense Consultation (KIDD) held in September this year indicates that the ROK and the US agreed to work closely with the US Strategic Command (USSTRATCOM) and US Forces Korea (USFK) to ensure that the newly created ROK Strategic Command (ROKSTRATCOM) would step up to the role and status of a strategic force, and that the two militaries will enhance the alliance’s combined

“...when the balance of power between the United States and China is destabilised, China retaliates against the weakest link, South Korea, not the United States.”

defence capabilities through sharing efforts such as the planning and execution of conventional and nuclear (force) integration (CNI) planning and execution through the NCG.

Rather than demonstrating nuclear sharing mechanisms, the NCG between the US and South Korea also focuses on how to coordinate and integrate US nuclear strategy with South Korea's formidable conventional weapons capabilities. This process of 'integration' has the potential to expose South Korea, which has no buffer zone, to the front lines of great power conflict, especially by implicating its conventional weapons systems in the complexities of nuclear deterrence between superpowers.

Third, the structure of the ROKSTRATCOM is also giving rise to some controversy. It is unclear which platforms should be controlled by ROKSTRATCOM as part of a unified and integrated ROK/US command structure and which should remain under the functional command of the South Korean military. The NCG and CNI processes will encounter significant challenges as they seek to establish boundaries between the ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), ROKSTRATCOM, and the ROK-US CFC. The process of implementing the NCG and CNI will impact elements of the existing and proposed ROK-US combined defence posture, including

the ROK JCS, Future Combined Forces Command (F-CFC), new operational plans and so on.

Given that the United States' primary concern is China, South Korea's dependence on US, and the power asymmetry between the US and South Korea, it is likely that changes to the combined defence posture will be centred on reconfiguring it to include how to respond to threats from not only North Korea but potentially China. This, in turn, means that China may perceive this reconfiguration process as inherently linked to a change in the nature of the ROK-US combined forces. Therefore, it is hard to rule out the possibility that the ROK-US Security Consultative Meeting (SCM) will issue a new strategic policy guidance (SPC) to enable the ROK force to work with the USSTRACOM based on the integration of the powers and capabilities of the ROK-US CFC and the ROKSTRATCOM. Such a process carries the risk that Korea's strategic autonomy will be further curtailed both in terms of the external security environment and at the bilateral level.

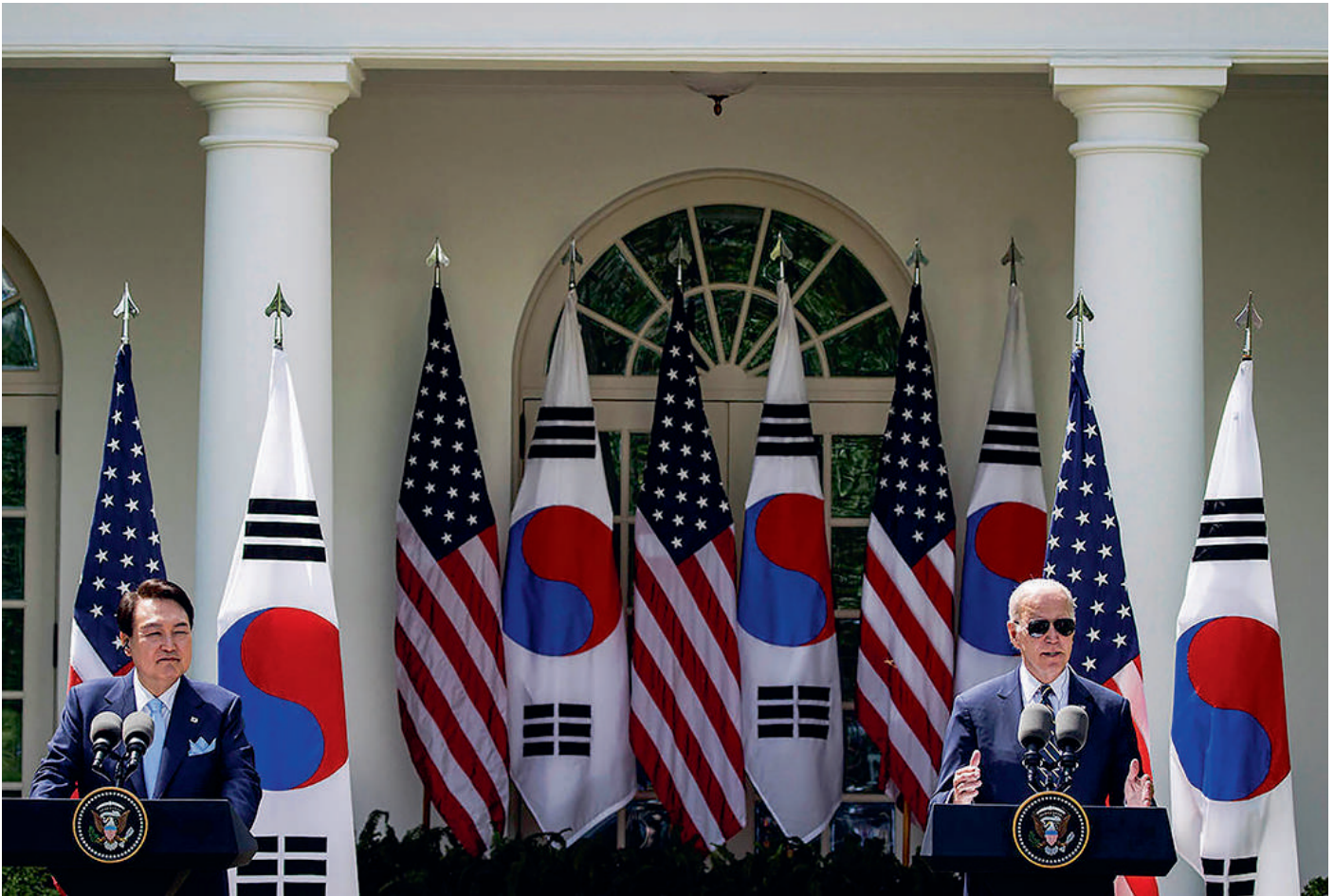
Finally, but by no means less importantly, there is the issue of China's reaction. Traditionally, the main significance of the Korean Peninsula to China has been as a buffer. It was seen as a land access route for the invasion of China. North Korea's nuclearisation effectively means the complete blocking of that land route. In other words, North Korea's nuclear development and nuclearisation for its own perceived needs also means the creation of an impermeable land buffer for China. And, paradoxically, this means that China has no more reason to support North Korea beyond what is necessary to prevent the collapse of its regime and its economy.

Conversely, the development of weapons systems centred on maritime

and air power has become a variable in its own right, deepening the interconnectedness of the Korean Peninsula, the East China Sea, and the South China Sea. From China's perspective, it has become a priority to shift South Korea to a more neutral position in the US-China relationship, rather than the traditional approach of just focusing on North Korea as a buffer. Therefore, China will constantly try to use both carrots and sticks to keep South Korea from sliding towards a posture in which it becomes the spearhead and confronts China.

Inescapably, South Korea is surrounded by countries that are formulating and pursuing their own strategic interests. China wants to prevent South Korea from tilting toward the United States and Japan. There is North Korea, which seeks to expand its strategic space through the upgrading of its nuclear arsenal and other various provocations. And there is the United States, which wants to integrate South Korea's conventional forces into its own nuclear strategy to deter China and advance its own strategic interests.

Of primary interest to South Korea is the manner in which the strategic interest and goals of these three players interact with each other and, therefore, with South Korea's interests. North Korea always emphasises that the nuclear issue is between North Korea and the United States. In reality, however, whenever it deems heightened tension and instability to be in its interests, North Korea seems to threaten South Korea with nuclear weapons. Also, as we have seen in the case of THAAD, when the balance of power between the United States and China is destabilised, China retaliates against the weakest link, South Korea, not the United States. When South Korea is challenged by North Korea or by China, the US tends to further



26 April 2023. Washington D.C., United States. President Joe Biden and South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol sign Washington Declaration.
Credit: Samuel Corum / The New York Times.

capitalise on South Korea’s growing dependence on US, creating a vicious cycle. This vicious cycle doesn’t just repeat itself but rather spirals and intensifies, leaving South Korea more clearly exposed in the middle of great power conflict.

Despite these troubling propensities, South Korea tends to narrow its own strategic space by looking at the North Korean threat simply as a bilateral challenge, rather than comprehensively objectifying the strategic environment. Even war is part of politics, and North Korea is developing nuclear weapons to survive and to break its isolation, not blindly threaten and risking annihilation. No matter how aggressive and irrational North Korea’s behaviour may seem on

the surface, it is highly calculated to achieve its own goals. Therefore, South Korea should prioritise a long-term perspective to stabilise the situation on the Korean Peninsula, including the North Korean nuclear issue, to prevent tensions from escalating too much. In addition, South Koreans need to improve their awareness of the situation, including its context, so that they can expand their autonomy.

When dealing with the US, the Washington Declaration and the management issues associated with the NCG, South Korea seems to be driven by a very weakly founded egocentric optimism that it can make US focus on North Korea, rather than a concern that South Korea will become entrapped in US interests.

South Korea is acting as if it does not understand that North Korea is only a part of the US strategy toward China, not a co-equal target in and of itself. Whether this tendency stems from ignorance or deep-seated path dependency, South Korea needs to get over this narrow confirmation bias and adopt a more autonomous and pragmatic approach to promote stability and peace in the region.

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Indonesia: Security Outlook – So Much to Do, So Little Time

Endy Bayuni

Indonesia has a serious problem when it comes to national defence, but it is a problem that few people in and outside the government would openly admit to even as the country is gearing up for general elections in February 2024. Indonesia today is more vulnerable than ever in its ability to defend against foreign aggression, or if it somehow gets caught up in a war elsewhere in the Indo-Pacific region. The likelihood of either is growing with the escalating geopolitical tensions. Indonesia may soon find that diplomacy, its primary means of deterring wars and conflicts with other countries, has its limits. Indonesia needs to strengthen its defence capability soon, for time may not be on its side.

For the last 15 years, Indonesia has been trying to build its military to meet what it calls the Minimum Essential Force (MEF), setting 2024 as the deadline for when the archipelagic country is expected to be able to defend by itself its sovereignty over the vast land and maritime territories which it controls. The MEF 2024 has compelled the country to embark on a massive weapons-buying spree to modernise its main defence forces, the Indonesian National Military (TNI). With the deadline fast approaching, Indonesia is clearly missing the target.

Defence and military officials today rarely mention the MEF 2024 in public speeches. Previously, since the program was unveiled in 2007, the nation was getting updates



3 June 2023. Singapore. General (Retd) Prabowo Subianto, Minister of Defense, Indonesia. Credit: IISS Shangri-La Dialogue.

on a regular basis. This stopped around four years ago. But TNI Chief Admiral Yudo Margono said in October 2023, a month before he retired, that only 65 percent of the MEF targets had been reached. Indonesia has not been buying its weapons needs fast enough due to budgetary constraints, further slowed down in recent years when a large chunk of the money earmarked for defence was reallocated to fight the COVID-19 pandemic.

Compounding Indonesia's defence worries is that many of the assumptions made in drawing up the MEF in 2007 are no longer relevant. This is certainly true when it comes to the perceptions of where Indonesia's external threats could come from. That was the decade when the world regarded China's rise as largely peaceful. There were already concerns at that time within the Indonesian defence community about what a militarily powerful China could do. The MEF to some extent was responding to these concerns, but not to the scale and nature of the challenge from China that unfolded in the years since.

Indonesia's external threat perceptions have dramatically turned for the worse since then. Not only has the likelihood of military clashes over territorial disputes between countries in the South China Sea grown, Jakarta also knows it should prepare for the possibility for rivalry between the United States and China erupting into a full-scale war, which would inevitably cascade into Indonesia and other countries in Indo-Pacific region.

Defence spending

Indonesia needs to do a lot of catching up, and it needs to move fast. This means spending a lot more on weapons. Its current defence spending of 0.8 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) counts among the lowest in the region. It can no longer take a laid-back attitude, as it did in the years when there were no immediate external threats. Any investment in defence at that time was primarily aimed at equipping the military to deal with internal security threats, such as countering terrorism, quelling separatist rebellions, and during the Soeharto years, quashing opposition forces. The military was

never designed to deal with external threats. The MEF 2024 seeks to change this, turning TNI's posture into one capable of quelling any foreign aggression, or at the very least defend Indonesia's territory.

The MEF was a wake-up call for the nation about its defence vulnerability such that there was a national consensus among politicians to allocate funds to seriously start beefing up the TNI. The program was eventually divided into three five-year phases beginning in 2009 and continuing until 2024. Since then, defence has become a major recipient of central government funding, albeit always in competition with either education, health, or economic infrastructure construction projects.

MEF 2024 was an ambitious and expensive program from the outset and its shopping list included big items like 11 squadrons of jetfighters, 182 warships, eight submarines, and

better air defence and radar systems. Complicating their procurement is the requirement by law that TNI must source them as much as possible locally, particularly from state-owned manufacturers PT Dirgantara Indonesia (aircraft), PT PAL (shipbuilding) and PT Pindad (armaments and munitions). When armaments are acquired from foreign sources, the deals must include a transfer of technology component to their Indonesian counterparts, getting them involved either in their development phase, or getting some sub-contracting jobs for these weapons in the manufacturing phase.

Problems came to a head in 2019 when it became clear that targets would not be met by 2024. Not even Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto, a retired Army lieutenant general, could convince President Joko Widodo to fork out more money to buy the weapons. Instead, the president

“Indonesia today is more vulnerable than ever in its ability to defend against foreign aggression...”

encouraged him to seek export credits from sellers.

Since his appointment as Defense Minister in 2019, Prabowo has signed many major arms deals including for 24 Boeing F-15EX fighters from the United States, 12 second-hand Mirage 2000-5 fighters from Qatar, 2 Scorpene submarines from France, 42 units of Dassault Rafale fighters from France, and 8 frigates from Italy. Also in the plan is the purchase of 24 Lockheed Martin S-70M *Black Hawk* helicopters and 12 unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) from Turkey.



6 September 2023. Jakarta, Indonesia. ASEAN Indo-Pacific Forum. Credit: Harviyan Perdana Putra / ASEAN 2023.

These big purchases still cannot cover the shortfalls in the MEF 2024. Prabowo has already come up with his own plan beyond 2024 which he calls the ‘Archipelagic Trident Shield’ with a reported price tag of \$125 billion. As one of the leading contenders in the February 2024 presidential election, he will surely pick up and develop the plan further if he wins (although he will also confront – and, as President, be obliged to give careful consideration to – the other compelling national objectives that need funding).

Putting faith in diplomacy

Indonesia’s best and probably only hope of dealing with potential external threats currently is by pursuing active diplomacy to defuse conflicts and deter wars from erupting in the first place. As a rising Asian

middle power, Indonesia has some leverages at its disposal to play a mediating role in the emerging conflicts. Indonesia relies on size – as the fourth most populous nation, the largest in Southeast Asia, and the 16th largest economy in the world, all of which confer some power and influence—in building its diplomatic credentials.

Indonesia, through ASEAN, continues to push Beijing to conclude the negotiations for a binding code of conduct in the South China Sea, which if signed would compel China and other claimant countries to refrain from using force in settling territorial disputes in the strategic waterways. Progress has been slow with China dragging its feet but never abandoning the talks that started in 2002. Indonesia had hoped for significant progress in 2023 when it

chaired ASEAN. In September, China and the ASEAN states agreed on a three-year time frame to complete the negotiations. Whether this will hold is open to question.

Indonesia insists that it is not a claimant state in any of these disputes with China, unlike its fellow ASEAN members, Malaysia, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Brunei. But China claims a part of Indonesia’s Natuna Sea as its traditional fishing ground, and its coast guard vessels have accompanied Chinese fishing boats on excursions into Indonesian waters. Several skirmishes between China’s coast guard and Indonesian navy vessels patrolling the Natuna Sea serve as warnings for Jakarta not to sit back and pretend to play the role of an honest broker in the South China Sea disputes. With Beijing now openly touting the official map that

September 2023. Indonesia. Exercise Super Garuda Shield. Credit: US Department of State.



claims the entire South China Sea as falling within its ‘nine-dashed-lines’, Indonesia needs a stronger response than simply insisting that it has no territorial dispute with China.

Despite increasing worries about Beijing’s intentions, Indonesia has resisted pressures to throw its weight behind the United States in its rivalry with China. China is Indonesia’s biggest trading partner, and a major source of investment funds that President Joko ‘Jokowi’ Widodo needs to finance his massive economic infrastructure projects. Joining the US-backed security alliances in the region would be detrimental to Indonesia’s economic interests.

Indonesia has also forged defence cooperation agreements with the United States, China, and many other countries in the region and around the world as a way of defusing tensions. Some of these agreements include conducting regular joint military exercises. One of these is the annual Garuda Shield, initially involving only Indonesia and the United States, but now expanded to more than one dozen countries and enlarged to involve over 10,000 soldiers supported by warships and jetfighters, suggesting that these war games go beyond just confidence building exercises. The drills with China, in contrast, is on a much smaller scale.

The Sino-US rivalry tests Indonesia’s ‘independent and active’ foreign policy doctrine of not taking sides in the increasingly polarised Indo-Pacific region. So far it has managed to stay on this independent path and to avoid having to align itself with one of the other powers. National interests would seem to dictate that Indonesia lean towards China for economic reasons and towards the United States for security reasons. Indonesia calls this ‘rowing between two coral reefs’, a foreign policy

concept developed as early as 1945 to guide the country as the cold war took shape. This time, as has been the case for decades, Indonesia can be expected to resist both pressures and temptation to join alliances.

Indonesia, through ASEAN, has come up with the ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific (AOIP) to offer an alternative path to other Indo-Pacific concepts and strategies already tabled by other countries including the United States, Australia, Japan, and India. While all these others are essentially designed to contain the rise of China, the ASEAN Outlook proposes a more inclusive approach to the evolution of the Indo-Pacific order as a new geopolitical entity, one that promotes cooperation, transparency, and compliance with the rules, and most importantly with ASEAN in the driving seat. Launched in 2018, AOIP is gaining traction with increasing endorsements from other countries. In September this year, Indonesia hosted the first Indo-Pacific summit to discuss cooperation programs between countries in the region.

Beyond MEF 2024

Diplomacy has its purpose, and it has served Indonesia’s defence and security needs well. But with the ever-growing tensions in the South China Sea and the intensifying rivalry between the United States and China in the Indo-Pacific region, Indonesia cannot assume them away as it tries its hands in mediation. Indonesia’s defence capability is simply not ready for the worst.

2024 will be a major opportunity for the country to rethink its national defence strategy, not only because it marks the end of the MEF 2004 program, but also because with the general elections in February, a new president and government will take over in October.

“...the ASEAN Outlook proposes a more inclusive approach to the evolution of the Indo-Pacific order as a new geopolitical entity...”

National defence has never been a hot button issue in election campaigns, unlike national security. But this should not stop presidential hopefuls from formulating a new strategy that considers both the progress Indonesia has made in building its defence capability under the MEF 2024 and the dramatically changed and changing geopolitical environment.

Whatever grand strategy Indonesia comes up with to replace MEF 2024, the next government must back it up with the financial commitment to cover the huge price-tag that comes with it. A commitment to increase defence spending from 0.8 percent to 2.0 percent of GDP, on par with other countries, would go a long way. In the last nine years, the MEF 2024 suffered under President Widodo who preferred to fund his popular economic and social programs, including on public health during the COVID-19 pandemic. Let’s hope the next president understands better the gravity and urgency of the geopolitical situation and commits to driving Indonesia toward seriously improving its defence capability.

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Thailand: A Security Outlook Clouded by Policy Dilemmas in the Changing Geopolitical Landscape

Pongphisoot Busbarat



22 September 2023. New York, United States. Statement by Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Thailand at the 78th Session of the United Nations General Assembly. Credit: Thai PBS World.

Thailand's new government and its policy direction

Since 22 August 2023, Thailand has embarked on a new chapter in its political history with the ascension of Mr. Srettha Thavisin from the Pheu Thai Party (PTP) to the helm of the government. The transition of power followed a protracted period of political standstill post the May 2023 elections, where the process of forming a coalition government reached an impasse. The stalemate ensued primarily because the Move

Forward Party (MFP) emerged as the parliamentary majority, positioning itself to potentially establish a progressive government with the inclusion of the PTP—a development perceived as a challenge to the entrenched conservative factions.

This several-month impasse is a manifestation of the longstanding ideological clash between the conservative elements, buttressed by military and establishment support, striving to uphold the status quo in Thailand's political and economic

landscape, and the progressive forces advocating for sweeping reforms. This ideological divide has been particularly pronounced since the mid-2000s, reaching a critical juncture with the military coup in 2006 that deposed Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

In the aftermath of the 2006 coup, the PTP, seen as Thaksin's political progeny, consistently triumphed in elections. However, for the first time, the PTP fell short of securing a majority. Notwithstanding its

middle-left ideological position on Thailand's political spectrum, the PTP's operational approach has been largely characterised by pragmatism and the pursuit of its members' interests. The party's decision to break away from the progressive alliance and partner with former ruling parties to form a coalition commanding 314 parliamentary seats across eleven political factions reflects this pragmatic approach. Yet, this diverse coalition is anticipated to face internal conflicts of interest that could potentially destabilise its unity and influence policymaking.

Among the most pressing challenges for the new government is the negative image of the PTP since its breakaway from the progressive alliance. The government must also navigate the complex terrain of managing growing societal dissatisfaction against powerful institutions like the military and the palace while tackling the economic difficulties plaguing the Thai economy. In a bid to reconcile these complexities, the PTP has evidently softened its rhetoric on military reform and the amendment of the draconian *lèse-majesté* law, as to balance immediate political stability with coalition longevity.

As economic issues are pivotal, Prime Minister Srettha's administration has pivoted to prioritise economic stimulus, aiming to rejuvenate Thailand's economy. For instance, the PTP has adamantly continued its digital wallet initiative endowed with THB \$10,000 for every citizen to invigorate domestic spending. Due to criticisms about its effectiveness and fiscal discipline, however, the government has amended the program's eligibility criteria. Moreover, Mr Srettha has shown his commitment since the election campaign to expanding Thailand's free trade agreements to boost Thailand's exports and appeal to

foreign investors. It has actively flagged the Land Bridge project in the southern seaboard to start the operation by 2030. This ambitious infrastructure initiative aims to create a land-based link between the Indian and Pacific Oceans crossing over Thailand's southern peninsula. The project involves constructing deep seaports in Chumporn on the Gulf of Thailand and Ranong on the Andaman Sea. These ports will be connected by a network of railways and roads. The overarching goal of this development is to tap into the congested traffic in the Malacca Strait and provide an alternative shipping route through Thailand. Consequently, this suggests a more outward-looking and assertive stance in international relations. This environment is a basis for the government to place pragmatism at the core of the government's strategy to navigate Thailand's intricate socio-political tapestry.

Thailand's core security challenges

Considering the politico-economic environment mentioned above, it can be said that Thailand's security landscape is broadly characterised more by non-traditional security challenges than by traditional military concerns. The decade-long political unrest following the 2006 military coup that unseated the Thaksin administration underscores an ongoing challenge central to Thailand's socio-economic transition.

Economic security has emerged as an immediate issue, with the country grappling with stagnation for more than ten years. Thailand has witnessed its economic vigour diminish, with annual GDP growth dwindling from an impressive 7% in 2012 to a modest 3-4% in more recent years, placing it among the ASEAN region's least rapidly growing economies.

“... Thailand's security landscape is broadly characterised more by non-traditional security challenges than by traditional military concerns.”

The struggle to revitalise and modernise its economy to evade the middle-income trap is palpable. Hindered by outdated infrastructure and an absence of innovative economic strategies, Thailand's policymakers appear to be constrained by obsolete paradigms, often relying on bygone methods to tackle present-day challenges. The nation's economic pillars—traditional manufacturing, agricultural exports, and tourism—face intense competition from newer economies embodying the 'flying geese' model of development.

Compounding these challenges is a demographic crunch fuelled by a worryingly low birth rate of about 1.46 births per woman, further straining an already tepid economic landscape. These economic strains, alongside political strife, are sowing deep socio-economic discontent. The Economist vividly calls Thailand's deep-rooted economic problem as 'It has got old before it has got rich.' As a result, a widening gap between social strata persists, and the idyllic image of 'The Land of Smiles' often masks the harsh realities of daily life for many Thais. Young people, in particular, face a precarious future within a socio-political structure that appears to inhibit their aspirations, with the rigidity of social hierarchy, entrenched patronage systems,

and pervasive corruption posing formidable barriers. The youth demographic's burgeoning frustration and aspiration for change have fuelled the rise of new political movements, which have managed to capture substantial youth support in recent times. The surprising victory of the MFP in the recent election points to this frustration.

These multifaceted socio-economic security challenges are at the heart of the Srettha administration's focus on economic stimulus. The ripple effects of this focus are likely to influence Thailand's broader foreign and security policy. Given the Thai economy's significant reliance on international trade, investment, and tourism, these sectors will either pave avenues of opportunity or impose constraints on the nation's policy objectives. The delicate interplay of domestic socio-economic policies and international economic engagements will thus be critical in shaping Thailand's path forward in both the regional and global arenas.

In light of the prevailing economic emphasis in national strategy, Mr. Srettha must craft a foreign policy

“Thailand’s diplomatic tightrope act is further complicated by an increasingly antagonistic global power dynamic, constraining the flexibility and hedging strategies that it has traditionally employed.”

that propels Thailand's national interests forward. This entails developing a diplomatic approach that directly contributes to the sustenance and improvement of the Thai population's livelihood. Yet, the task of steering through the complex maze of current international relations is daunting. Mr. Srettha faces an array of external challenges that will inevitably shape the contours of Thailand's foreign and security policy decisions.

Challenges to Thailand's foreign and security directions

The escalating rivalry between the United States and China, particularly manifested in the trade tensions since 2018 is perhaps the most consequential issue. It has compelled Thailand to recalibrate its diplomatic stance, striving to maintain a strategic equilibrium. The tumultuous events in global geopolitics, such as the protracted conflict in Ukraine since 2022 and the unexpected flaring of tensions in the Gaza Strip in October 2023, have introduced additional layers of complexity to an already volatile international security environment. These geopolitical dynamics are poised to engender considerable fluctuations in the global economy in the coming year. This projection is compounded by the anticipation of a sustained economic slowdown in China, an eventuality that threatens to exert downward pressure on the fragile post-pandemic economic recovery efforts of nations worldwide.

Closer to Thailand's border, the ongoing Myanmar Crisis presents a particularly acute challenge for Thailand's foreign policy, demanding a nuanced approach to conflict resolution and the provision of humanitarian aid. Thailand finds itself at the crossroads of geopolitical interests and regional stability,

necessitating a foreign policy that is as responsive to global trends as it is rooted in regional commitments.

The intersection of these regional issues with the broader strokes of international relations underscores the need for Thailand to adopt a multifaceted and agile foreign policy framework. Such a framework would not only enable Thailand to navigate the immediate geopolitical shockwaves but also to align its strategic interests with the evolving contours of global economic and political landscapes. As Thailand seeks to fortify its role on the international stage, its ability to deftly balance global pressures with regional imperatives will be a determining factor in its pursuit of sustained growth and stability.

The US-China competition

Navigating the intensifying US-China rivalry presents a formidable challenge for Thailand's foreign policy strategy in Southeast Asia. The country has long maintained a delicate equilibrium between these two global powers, yet the pressure to choose a side is likely to mount as tensions, particularly in the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea, continue to escalate.

Thailand has adeptly managed to walk a fine line, leveraging economic benefits from its close relationship with China, while also depending on its historic security alliance with the United States to counterbalance China's burgeoning influence in the region. Moreover, Bangkok has been proactive in broadening its international partnerships, fostering varied cooperative endeavours with countries such as India, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and European nations, as well as with other developing countries.

Despite this, the growing geopolitical tensions are increasingly constraining

Thailand's ability to continue its hedging strategy. Nevertheless, nearly ten years of military-led governance following the 2014 coup has shifted Thailand's alignment closer to Beijing. Despite recent efforts by Thailand to rebalance its international strategy back to its conventional stance, this task has been complicated by the increasing hostility between Washington and Beijing.

As a result, increasing cooperation with one power could inadvertently signal a preference, potentially upsetting the delicate balance Thailand has maintained. Compounding this challenge is the increasing realignment of Thailand's important partners towards Washington, especially in terms of security, as evidenced by their participation in US-led initiatives like the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), AUKUS, and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF). The frequency of joint military drills and maritime security patrols among these partners is rising, underscoring a regional shift towards more definitive security stances.

In this evolving geopolitical landscape, the possibility that countries might be compelled to choose sides becomes increasingly plausible. For Thailand, this would mean assessing its strategic interests and making difficult decisions that could redefine its foreign relations and security policies. As regional dynamics evolve to reflect more clearly defined blocs, Thailand's ability to maintain its traditional balanced diplomacy will be tested. The nation's strategic response will require a combination of diplomatic finesse, strategic foresight, and a nuanced understanding of both regional and global geopolitical trends.

Thailand's coherent stance on major global conflicts

Thailand's foreign policy, traditionally characterised by a balancing act known as 'Bamboo bending in the wind,' is indeed facing scrutiny. This approach has often been interpreted as a strategic flexibility that served the nation well in the past but is increasingly seen as a shortcoming in the current complex geopolitical climate. Under the previous administration led by General Prayut Chan-o-cha, Thailand was often seen as preferring a low profile on the global stage, which drew criticism from foreign policy experts who argued that Thai diplomacy was at a nadir, lacking in both proactivity and creativity.

The immediate challenge for the Srettha government is to articulate a clear and coherent position on global issues, including the war in Ukraine and the recent escalation in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Thailand's vacillating voting pattern on Ukraine-related resolutions at international forums—swinging from condemnation of the invasion to abstaining on subsequent resolutions—has raised questions about its stance and interpretation of neutrality.

The complexities of these international issues are deeply felt at home, particularly with the recent conflict in the Gaza Strip, which has directly impacted Thai nationals. The tragic loss of thirty-two Thai lives and the situation of Thai citizens taken hostage necessitate a response that balances humanitarian concerns with diplomatic negotiations for their safe release. It is a sensitive and urgent matter that requires the Thai government to mobilise its diplomatic channels promptly and effectively while navigating the intricacies of international conflict resolution. In dealing with the hostage situation, the Thai government's efforts are not

just about projecting a stance on the conflict but also about protecting its citizens and their interests abroad. It necessitates a nuanced approach that combines immediate consular support for affected individuals, strategic diplomacy to secure their release, and a broader foreign policy that may need to find a fine balance between Israel and the Arab nations.

The crisis in Myanmar and Thailand's diplomatic response

The evolving crisis in Myanmar presents a critical test for Thailand's foreign policy—serving as a pivotal gauge for its diplomatic strategy in the region. The Thai government has been navigating this delicate situation through a policy of 'quiet diplomacy,' engaging in discreet and multifaceted dialogues, notably at the ministerial level on two separate occasions since the latter part of 2022. In a significant diplomatic manoeuvre, Thailand inaugurated a Track 1.5 minilateral dialogue, a proactive initiative aiming to include Myanmar's military leadership in peace negotiations. This forum has extended invitations to a consortium of aligned nations, including China, India, Bangladesh, Laos, Vietnam, and Brunei.

This approach has enabled dialogue with Naypyidaw to facilitate conflict resolution and maintained Thailand's ability to secure Myanmar's cooperation, especially in providing humanitarian aid along their shared borders. Spearheading these efforts, Thailand was able to establish a Humanitarian Task Force, with stewardship entrusted to the Foreign Minister. This coalition has forged partnerships with multiple United Nations agencies and an array of global organisations to propose the creation of a humanitarian corridor, which is yet to be fully operationalised.

While there have been tangible but modest achievements, the delivery of humanitarian aid and engagements with senior United Nations representatives have been subject to frequent delays and obstruction by local military factions. The conditional release of Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar's deposed leader, while carrying symbolic weight, does not translate into a significant easing of her legal burdens. She remains under house arrest, facing an accumulation of 14 charges that collectively could lead to 27 years of incarceration.

Regionally, Thailand's minilateral approach has attracted scrutiny and critique from several ASEAN counterparts, including Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore. These nations perceive Thailand's strategy as a deviation

from the ASEAN Five Point Consensus, potentially jeopardising the cohesion and unified front of the ASEAN community. This criticism underscores the tension between national diplomatic initiatives and the collective aspirations of ASEAN, reflecting the intricate balancing act Thailand must perform in the shadow of Myanmar's deepening crisis.

Thailand's policy dilemma

As the regional and global geopolitical landscape undergoes rapid transformation, Thailand is confronted with a policy conundrum. The nation's pursuit of diverse core interests is becoming increasingly complex, with potential for policy objectives to clash and diminish one another.

Thailand's primary objective in the wake of the pandemic is to reignite its economic dynamism. The Srettha administration has made this a focal point of its policy efforts, leveraging Thailand's strategic relationships with major global powers to fortify its economic agenda. At the 78th UNGA in New York, Mr. Srettha not only engaged in bilateral discussions with the US government but also courted substantial American corporations, including Tesla, Goldman Sachs, Microsoft, Estée Lauder, and BlackRock, encouraging them to invest in Thailand. Yet, despite these endeavours, Thailand's appeal to American companies appears to be waning. Although the US maintains a strong presence in Thailand's FDI stocks, American business investments have slowed, trailing



19 October 2023. Beijing, China. Thai Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin delivers a statement at the 3rd Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation. Credit: Thai PBS World.

behind China, Japan, and fellow ASEAN nations in recent years.

China's burgeoning economic influence in Thailand, characterised by robust trade and investment, cannot be overlooked by Thai policymakers. China's growing economic ties have positioned it as one of Thailand's top trade partners, rivalling Japan's longstanding role. The Prime Minister's attendance at the 3rd BRI Summit in China in October 2023 further underscores the shift, with both nations placing considerable emphasis on bilateral economic initiatives, from increasing Chinese investment and trade, including speeding up the infrastructure projects like the high-speed railway. The policy of visa-free entry for Chinese nationals launched in September complements Thailand's strategy to reinvigorate its tourism sector post-pandemic.

However, the heavy economic leverage that China wields over Thailand is not without its complexities. Take, for example, the controversy surrounding the procurement of a Chinese submarine by the Thai Navy, which has already seen significant financial commitment from Thailand. A contractual hiccup emerged when China was unable to source a German engine, proposing a Chinese alternative instead. Despite the Navy Chief's initial approval, public outcry over potential contract violations and safety concerns has been significant. Yet, Thai policymakers tread carefully, wary of alienating China, and have hesitated to escalate the dispute legally. The suggestion to switch to acquiring a Chinese frigate in lieu of the submarine is indicative of the sway that economic ties can have on broader decision-making processes.

The Land Bridge project in Thailand's southern region is poised to significantly boost the local economy through substantial infrastructure development. However, it confronts several challenges, including attracting investors to fund the project and convincing users to opt for this route as an alternative to Singapore and the Malacca straits. Strategically, the project is particularly advantageous to China, as it provides an additional link between the Indian and Pacific oceans and would be controlled solely by Thailand. Upon completion, this project will provide China with an additional maritime access route via land connections in mainland Southeast Asia. It will integrate seamlessly with Thailand's road and railway networks, extending throughout mainland Southeast Asia. Notably, the Laos-China railway is already operational, and will be eventually link to the Thailand-China high-speed railway which is expected to be completed soon. Consequently, the Land Bridge project will enhance China's access to the Indian Ocean, offering a sea route that circumvents the disputed South China Sea, where the US and its allies dispute China's territorial claims. Consequently, the potential dominance of Chinese businesses in this project could inadvertently amplify China's economic and political influence in Thailand in the future.

Moreover, Thailand's engagement with Russia during the BRI Summit, including discussions with President Putin to deepen economic relations, encourage Russian tourism, and invite him to visit Thailand, presents its own set of diplomatic intricacies. While such talks aim to boost Thailand's economy, they also risk complicating relations with Western nations, particularly those who have imposed sanctions on Russia following its invasion of Ukraine.

Thailand's diplomatic tightrope act is further complicated by an increasingly antagonistic global power dynamic, constraining the flexibility and hedging strategies that it has traditionally employed. Economic policies are now inextricably linked with foreign and security issues, creating potential pitfalls at every turn.

The Srettha government, therefore, faces the imperative task of crafting policies that delicately balance these competing interests. Strategic foresight is required to mitigate unintended repercussions, with the overarching goal of catalysing Thailand's economic revival amidst the shifting tides of global geopolitics.

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Singapore: Rethinking Confidence-Building Measures amid Geopolitical Rivalry

Joel Ng

The recurrent theme enunciated by Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong at the 2023 G20 and ASEAN summits was simple: Global tensions had put multilateralism under pressure. This was not merely a policy problem divided by different philosophies over whether to conduct foreign policy multilaterally or bilaterally, but a fundamental problem that zero-sum thinking threatened to unravel global and regional interdependencies – a critical safeguard against conflict. While unlikely in the short term, deteriorating conditions expose the possibility that interdependence may unravel if present trends are not halted.

Recent developments toward national ‘resilience’ across states has seen the reconfiguration of supply chains toward domestic production or the ‘friendshoring’ of production regarded as critical on security or strategic grounds. Put another way, more and more states appear to be anticipating and preparing for conflict, regardless of whether they are likely to be party to such a future event. When the likelihood of conflict rises, demand for domestic policies that strengthen ‘resilience’ also increase, but one must also consider the danger that such exclusivity entails.

Proliferating conflicts and major shifts in multilateralism

The 2020s are already shaping up to be the bloodiest decade since the end of the Cold War. Since the Covid-19 pandemic, new or escalated violence in Myanmar, Ukraine, Sudan, Nagorno-Karabakh, and the Gaza Strip have added to the formidable number of conflicts worldwide. The Peace Research Institute Oslo labelled 2022 the bloodiest year for conflict-related deaths in 28 years, as these recent conflicts added to longstanding ones in the Middle East and Africa.



10 May 2023. Labuan Bajo, Indonesia. Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong being greeted by Indonesia's President Joko Widodo at the 42nd Asian Summit. Credit Star Times.

While the July 2023 NATO summit in Vilnius drew headlines around the question of Ukraine’s admission, this Atlantic gathering also raised eyebrows because of the involvement of several Asia-Pacific states. With increasing overttness, even NATO states view the Taiwan Strait as the leading flashpoint for conflict, destabilising the region and therefore a cause for collective action, even as China maintains this to be a strictly internal affair. The danger is any misstep here could add a conflict *between* major powers to the prevailing mix of conflicts.

The G20 and BRICS summits outside the region sent some rather contradictory signals. On the one hand, both doubled down on inclusiveness as they expanded their participants: the G20 accepted

the African Union as member while BRICS saw the admission of Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. On the other hand, voices in the West appeared alarmed at the formation of a nascent anti-Western bloc through BRICS, undoubtedly coloured by Vladimir Putin’s sharp language against the states assisting Ukraine during his virtual speech at the summit.

While ‘anti-West’ is a stretch to describe the character of BRICS, there can be little doubt that some of these moves are a response to Western actions to ‘friendshore’ or ‘reshore’ critical sectors and commodities. While the West has valid security concerns underlying these moves, they do involve the risk of building monopolistic structures

located in the West that exacerbate the divide between developed and developing worlds.

Only great power politics will fill the void of an unravelled liberal order

Following the expanded membership of the G20 and BRICS, media headlines harped on the return of the ‘Global South’. Yet it would be remiss to ignore the massive restructuring going on in the ‘Global North’ that has fostered agreement in the Global South on the need for such counterweights. Should the West reject inclusivity in favour of more exclusive policies (in order to constrain rising powers or threats), it is likely to hasten the unravelling of its own liberal order.



9 September 2023. New Delhi, India. Singapore’s Prime Minister Lee and UK Prime Minister Sunak at the G20 Summit. Credit: Lee Hsien Loong/Facebook.

The significance of these shifts and of the BRICS' push for inclusion of regional heavyweights is indicative of the mounting pressures being directed at the prevailing liberal order. Balancing rather than inclusion certainly now appears to be the more fundamental driver of endeavours to reorder of the international system. These moves and counters are going to be increasingly frequent if transactionalism and exclusionary mechanisms become part of the standard foreign policy toolkit. While it is too early to assert that this makes it a more dangerous environment for small states, their already-limited strategic autonomy will be increasingly constrained.

The problem of transactional foreign policies is not so much that states should not look after their own interests (and assure themselves of gains), but that transactionalism also requires hasty reciprocity for small aggravations. The world may not be in a situation of a 'Cold War 2.0', yet the zero-sum thinking and short-term retaliation is an echo of past practices. This desire to unshackle their foreign policies involves challenging rules-based frameworks to afford them more autonomy, sometimes dredging anti-Western sentiments as justification.

Yet if too many states reject the logic of the multilateral order on account of its imperfections (some entirely valid, such as the inequalities it produced), they risk throwing the baby out with the bathwater – that is, unravelling the underlying security provided by rules-based frameworks. It is worth examining the underlying logic of this order to explain the problem and the need to change course.

The escapable logic of 'tit-for-tat'

A critical issue lies in a paradox: amid deep uncertainty (not least that precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic), states want to maintain maximal autonomy for strategic decisions. This makes them unlikely to commit to binding agreements – such as rules-based frameworks – that would restrain their range of actions. At the same time, in order to regain confidence in the states that they distrust, they need to see such states commit to restraint. Viewed from a systemic level, these interests are mutually contradictory.

Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim at the Asia-Pacific Roundtable this year said that 'tit-for-tat manoeuvres' were being deployed amid US-China rivalry with serious implications for supply chains. Trade wars tend to generate these actions, but to mitigate them, it is vital to understand the costs and payoffs involved. This in turn provides the possibility to change course. To reiterate, the key step is to discern how the strategic landscape looks from these two vantage points.

Game theorists have long identified the 'tit-for-tat' approach as an effective strategy to secure optimal outcomes in the classic game of 'Prisoner's Dilemma'. In this model, two prisoners under investigation must coordinate their statements to the police to avoid the worst possible outcome (both giving evidence against the other, known as 'defecting'). However, the problem is that if one attempts the cooperative option while the other defects, the cooperative player will be punished severely (the confessing prisoner gets a light sentence and pins the blame on the one refusing to talk, who then receives a heavy sentence). The best payoff comes from both cooperating with each other, so the challenge is to ensure the cooperating player does

“Balancing rather than inclusion certainly now appears to be the more fundamental driver of endeavours to reorder of the international system.”

not get caught out by a defection of the other prisoner. Such models are often used in foreign policy analysis to anticipate the reactions of states to hypothetical situations.

The tit-for-tat playbook works for multiple rounds of this game, but an under-appreciated fact is that the strategy contains its own solution. The central problem the prisoners have is the inability to communicate and hence coordinate their actions. Therefore, tit-for-tat requires the players to communicate through their earlier rounds of action. In cooperating during a given round, they signal to the other that they will not defect. This should be interpreted by the other player as an invitation to cooperate in future rounds, setting up a virtuous cycle that ensures both get the best outcomes. But communication works both ways. If one defects, this signals to the other that cooperation is not on the cards and leads the other to defect as well. This results in a vicious spiral - but no player faces the more severe punishment that stems from cooperating naively.

Breaking the vicious spiral

In today's Sino-US competition, past actions by both sides have been interpreted by the other as 'defections'. While the stakes have not been too high (yet), a slow but

observable deteriorating spiral is in action. Meanwhile, cooperative actions or signals have been too few to reverse the overall trend. Each year, the US-China relationship appears to be in a worse state compared to last; and that previous year itself in a worse state compared to the one before – as previous *Regional Security Outlooks* will attest. This is a result of the reciprocal ‘tit-for-tat’ in real life. That it may be expanding globally into other structures such as the G20 or BRICS would be a worrying trend and a priority for a change of course.

Breaking a vicious spiral is difficult when rules-based frameworks are not under consideration for fear of hindering potential reactions to the other party’s actions and preserving precious strategic autonomy. Third-party intervention is also a tall order when it involves the world’s great powers. Great powers are prone to underappreciate cooperative overtures (and hence fail to reciprocate positively) while reacting negatively to alleged provocations. The tit-for-tat playbook’s problem as it stands is not giving as much weight to cooperation as it does to defection. This comes down to an issue of trust.

Cooperation cannot be developed without trust, and building trust has usually been done through confidence-building measures (CBMs). While it may be difficult to initiate CBMs between great powers directly, they do seek the mantle of global leadership and this leadership is predicated on marshalling support from the rest of the world. While it would be good if this leadership emanates from emolliating their differences, we may be some steps away from that, given the deterioration of trust between them.

However, there are, as highlighted above, numerous conflicts the world urgently needs to address. If the US and China would come together

to help address the conflicts from which they are relatively detached, it would burnish their credentials as responsible great powers and may build confidence between them. These lesser conflicts are critical problems in their respective regions, yet great power attention to the issue would offer strong signals, demonstrating the value of their direct involvement to solving pressing global problems. The rest of the world may understand the great powers’ conflict management strategies as CBMs, particularly if the principles guiding their approach can be readily detected. On the other hand, if their approach suggests that protecting their options is the primary operating principle it is likely to be a cause for concern rather than a source of confidence.

Smaller states should urge them to take on these responsibilities with a view to building confidence in their global leadership and demonstrate their statesmanship. A consultative approach to involve all the regional actors with a stake in the conflict would undoubtedly go a long way. Unlike the 1990s when CBMs were largely oriented around understanding how states would relate with one another as they emerged from the Cold War, today CBMs should have a much more ambitious impetus to try to reverse the course of deteriorating spirals of distrust. Engagement on all fronts is critical.

Rebuilding trust and strengthening existing instruments

In Southeast Asia, ASEAN has a binding agreement for the management of tensions through its Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), whose ratification has been a precondition for those aspiring to engage in the region’s affairs. There should be regional interest – indeed, expectations – for great powers to

“ASEAN might consider convening a conference of TAC signatories as a suitable high-visibility first step to initiating a new round of confidence-building measures...”

demonstrate how their leadership has enhanced the visibility and relevance of the TAC, as a safeguard against the deeply unsettling 2020s being extended or repeated. Track II actors may also play a role in examining and setting out for regional actors the strategic implications of signing the TAC. This would be done with a view to offering tangible suggestions to the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) that itself needs to enhance its role in managing tensions during this era of strategic rivalry.

The original ARF process envisioned moving through stages of confidence-building measures, preventive diplomacy, and conflict resolution and was a suitable framework for establishing cooperative security priorities in the immediate post-Cold War peace. Today, however, managing regional conflicts is no longer a hypothetical contingency. The onset and risk of conflicts regionally requires more proactive action. ASEAN might consider convening a conference of TAC signatories as a suitable high-visibility first step to initiating a new round of confidence-building measures between all actors.

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Vietnam: Pursuing Strategic Autonomy in a World of Strategic Uncertainties

Dr. Vu Le Thai Hoang & Dr. Ngo Di Lan

Key developments in recent years – from the COVID-19 pandemic to the conflict in Ukraine, as well as escalating tensions in the Taiwan Strait – serve as stark reminders of the uncertainty inherent in international relations. Earlier this year, the US shot down a supposed Chinese weather balloon, an action that could have precipitated a grave diplomatic crisis with unpredictable consequences. More recently, BRICS welcomed six new members, thereby fortifying the bloc's image as the champion of the Global South and as a counterbalance to the institutions underpinning the current order.

Many countries, including Vietnam, recognise that urgently seeking the greatest possible strategic autonomy constitutes a pragmatic response to this increasingly fluid international environment. This is because higher levels of autonomy mean that nations can exert greater control over their foreign policy decisions, thereby mitigating the risks associated with fluctuating international dynamics. Indeed, for small states and rising middle powers, strategic autonomy is arguably the most appropriate response to the challenges posed by strategic uncertainty, especially in the Indo-Pacific region.

The challenges of strategic uncertainty

In an ideal world, leaders would know everything they need to make the best decisions. They would know how strong each country is, who their friends and enemies are, and the precise balance of power between various factions inside their own government. They could also predict how people would react to their decisions and how big events like a pandemic would transform the strategic landscape. With this kind of information, leaders could easily make prudent choices, without having to guess what might happen next. In this hypothetical scenario,



10 May 2023. Labuan Bajo, Indonesia. Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh and Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong at the 42nd ASEAN Summit. Credit: VOV.

Vietnamese leaders would, for example, know well in advance how other countries will view and react to an upgrade in the Vietnam-US relationship to a comprehensive strategic partnership.

However, we do not live in a world of perfect information. In the real world, leaders have generally accurate understandings of the strategic landscape but may lack awareness of the finer details. Even in the best-case scenario, they would not be able to predict the exact consequences of their actions and the second-order effects of various developments. Broadly speaking, however, they are still sufficiently well informed to navigate the complexities of international politics in ways that serve their country's national interests. Occasionally, however, it is necessary to further complicate the assessment by adding in the concept of 'black swans' and 'grey rhinos,' terms mentioned by President Xi Jinping at the 20th Party Congress. Black swans are unpredictable events with enormous consequences, such as the Russo-Ukrainian conflict when it first broke out in early 2022. Initially, some feared that a quick and decisive Russian victory could dismantle the current rules-based order, to the detriment of many small nations. As the conflict has dragged on, however, the concern has shifted toward the possibility of a direct conflict between NATO and Russia, which could trigger a catastrophic chain reaction not unlike what occurred on the eve of World War I. These events introduce an acute degree of strategic uncertainty by throwing the entire system into flux and fundamentally changing the rules of the game.

Countries in the Indo-Pacific region, particularly Vietnam and other Southeast Asian states, are finding themselves in an increasingly uncertain and dangerous environment. China is still powerful

enough to make a bid for supremacy in the region, yet its economy is slowing with unpredictable consequences. The US, while repeatedly rejecting the Cold War as an appropriate frame of reference and denying that it seeks to contain China, is clearly building a network of minilateral groupings to fortify its presence and influence in the region. Add to this the disruptions in global supply chains and new non-traditional security threats such as cyber warfare and climate change, and the landscape becomes even more volatile. Complicating matters further, the paralysis of multilateral institutions both at the regional (Indo-Pacific) level and globally, has eroded the traditional mechanisms for cooperative problem-solving. Into this mix, the emergence of India as a potentially new pole and the active diplomacy of middle powers such as Japan and Australia have only made it harder for policymakers to clearly envisage alternative scenarios, complicating their efforts to plan for long-term stability. It is against this backdrop that the concept of 'strategic autonomy' gains renewed importance, offering countries a path to navigate these choppy geopolitical waters with greater agency and flexibility.

Strategic autonomy: old concept, new solution

The proliferation of 'strategic autonomy' in Asian policy discourse is a relatively new phenomenon. Prime Minister Modi in various speeches has reaffirmed India's determined pursuit of strategic autonomy, which is particularly evident in its diplomatic approach toward the US. Following a meeting between representatives of China and the Philippines in March 2023, it was reported that both sides 'shared the view that it is crucial for countries in the region to maintain strategic autonomy and enhance solidarity and coordination'. This message also

“...the paralysis of multilateral institutions both at the regional (Indo-Pacific) level and globally, has eroded the traditional mechanisms for cooperative problem-solving.”

emerged from President Emmanuel Macron's trip to China in April. On the sidelines of the International Forum for Trilateral Cooperation, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi called upon countries to 'promote inclusive Asian values, and cultivate strategic autonomy' among other objectives. And at the 42nd ASEAN Summit in Labuan Bajo, Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh highlighted strategic autonomy as one of the 'three core issues that determine the identity, values, vitality and prestige of ASEAN'.

Conceptually, however, strategic autonomy is by no means novel. For Europe, strategic autonomy dates back to at least the late 1980s, when it became clear that the Soviet Union and the US were cooperating to end the Cold War on peaceful terms. Many feared that ending the Cold War would deprive the Western alliance of the glue that bonded them: a powerful common threat. Would the US maintain its formidable presence on the European continent if the Soviet Union was no longer the primary threat? As the American grand strategy debate in the 1990s showed, there were serious discussions about whether the US should continue

“A multi-vector foreign policy that establishes a web of diverse partnerships that ensures that no single power has excessive leverage, could provide the strategic wiggle room a nation needs in volatile times.”

underwriting European security. It was in that context that European policymakers debated whether to pursue strategic autonomy, which from their perspective, meant having

the willingness and acquiring the capabilities to act without or only with minimal US assistance.

From the Indian perspective, strategic autonomy is rooted in the Non-Aligned Movement. Although the 1962 Sino-Indian War and the 1965 war with Pakistan led to some re-evaluation and brought India closer to the Soviet Union, the core principle of maintaining an independent foreign policy remained intact. The end of the Cold War and the economic liberalization of the 1990s under Prime Minister Narasimha Rao marked another recalibration, as India sought to diversify its international partnerships to reduce reliance on any single power. Modern Indian thinkers therefore reframed non-alignment as strategic autonomy in an era that witnessed India seeking deeper engagements with major

powers, particularly the US, without compromising its core non-alignment posture.

Therefore, at its core, strategic autonomy is having the capacity to independently execute preferred policy options on vital strategic matters at any given time, even in the face of countervailing pressures. In essence, a state possessing strategic autonomy could practically pursue any policy it prefers, whether that be hedging, isolation or forming an alliance with another country. Strategic autonomy therefore represents an ideal state that many nations strive to attain to safeguard their national interests, because it allows them to mitigate uncertainty, retain a sense of control, and avoid surprises when navigating international politics. From Vietnam’s perspective, robust capabilities and an independent policy orientation



10 September 2023. Hanoi, Vietnam. US President Joe Biden attends a meeting with Vietnam’s Communist Party General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong. Credit: Evelyn Hockstein / Reuters.

are the twin foundations of strategic autonomy. Achieving strategic autonomy in practice necessitates tangible action across multiple domains. For countries like Vietnam, this would mean diversifying foreign economic, technology and security partnerships to reduce dependence on any single country. Further investment in sectors like renewable energy and high-tech manufacturing could enhance domestic resilience, mitigating the risks posed by disruptions in global supply chains. Another avenue could be to deepen defense cooperation with a range of partners to dilute risks; for example, enhancing maritime security collaborations with Japan and India while participating in military exercises with like-minded partners. A multi-vector foreign policy that establishes a web of diverse partnerships that ensures that no single power has excessive leverage, could provide the strategic wiggle room a nation needs in volatile times.

It becomes evident that for many states, attaining strategic autonomy is not just another policy choice, but an essential strategy for navigating a strategically uncertain geopolitical landscape. By having a diversified portfolio of economic, security, and diplomatic relationships, Vietnam and other countries in the Indo-Pacific can more deftly navigate complexities and mitigate the risks associated with being overly reliant on a single major power. Whether it's the sudden imposition of trade tariffs, the withdrawal of security guarantees, or political pressures exerted for geopolitical gains, a country with a high degree of strategic autonomy has more options for response and adjustment. It can shift its focus toward other partners and counterbalance losses or pressures exerted from one direction. This flexibility becomes an invaluable tool for managing both tactical and strategic uncertainties,

allowing nations to not just survive but also to capitalise on the very complexities and ambiguities that characterise the modern geopolitical landscape. Therefore, in a world full of uncertainties, strategic autonomy serves not as a mere buffer but as a dynamic framework for national strategy.

Coping with future uncertainties in the Indo-Pacific

Whether the Indo-Pacific region is already embroiled in strategic uncertainty is a matter open to debate, but what seems clear is that 2024 is shaping up to be a year that could substantially intensify such uncertainty. A confluence of pivotal events looms on the horizon, each holding the potential to dramatically reshape regional dynamics. To start, the general elections scheduled in Taiwan, India, and Indonesia could usher in administrations with divergent foreign policy orientations, thereby disrupting patterns of alignment and perhaps forging unexpected new ones. Similarly, in the US and in Russia, domestic political changes may lead to significant foreign policy adjustments. Beyond electoral politics, the South China Sea remains a powder keg, with China's ever-growing naval prowess and increasingly assertive territorial claims elevating the risk of conflict, either through miscalculation or deliberate action.

Adding another layer of complexity to this volatile mix are emergent technologies like Artificial Intelligence (AI). Advances in AI and other disruptive technologies promise to significantly alter military capabilities and reconfigure the balance of power, while creating new frontiers for competition. These technologies may serve as force multipliers for existing tensions, as states scramble to attain or maintain a technological

edge, potentially leading to an AI arms race. More dangerously, they add an opaque layer to the calculus of strategic decision-making, as states find it increasingly difficult to assess each other's capabilities and intentions accurately. Therefore, 2024 could be a watershed year that serves as a crucible for new geopolitical realities, with heightened uncertainty emanating from electoral outcomes, regional flashpoints, and the disorienting pace of technological advancements.

In this volatile context, the pursuit of strategic autonomy offers states a way to navigate the rising tide of uncertainty. Strategic autonomy does not mean autarky or isolation and should not be equated with populism or anti-globalization tendencies. Strategic autonomy is about having the capacity to make sovereign choices that align with national interests, despite countervailing pressures. Thus, by adopting policies that foster strategic autonomy, countries can create a buffer against the shocks of electoral shifts in key players, military flare-ups in regional hotspots, and the wild card of emerging technologies. More importantly, for Vietnam and other rising middle powers in the Indo-Pacific, pursuing strategic autonomy should be viewed as a collective enterprise, not as a zero-sum game. As these states attain higher degrees of autonomy, they could mutually empower each other and regional institutions such as ASEAN to more effectively assert its centrality. Embracing strategic autonomy therefore is not just prudence—it's a fundamental necessity in an era marked by ever greater uncertainty.

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Malaysia: Domestic Politics, South China Sea, and US-China Rivalry

Ngeow Chow Bing

Malaysia's foreign and security policy is generally consistent across different administrations. This has been the case even with the frequent political changes that Malaysia experienced since the general elections in 2018, which toppled the long-ruling Barisan Nasional (BN, or the National Front) government. Including the current Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, who became the prime minister following the 2022 general elections, Malaysia has had four different prime ministers since the 2018 elections, coming from different parties. However, Malaysia's foreign and security policy, by and large, has not changed much.

Domestic Politics

Recent developments in domestic politics will reinforce this pattern of consistency. The general elections in November 2022 produced no conclusive results. Anwar, who leads the Pakatan Harapan (PH, or Hope Alliance) coalition, had to put together PH and BN, erstwhile political nemeses for decades, together with regional coalitions from Sarawak and Sabah, into an uneasy coalitional "unity government." On paper, the unity government commands a comfortable majority in the parliament, and with the passing of the "anti-hopping law" right before the general elections, Anwar's government should be stable enough to last until the end of its term. However, Anwar can never be too assured of the sustainability of this government. PH and BN share no common ideological outlooks, and have clashed with each other intensely in the past. The strong animosities between the grassroots of the two coalitional partners have not



10 August 2023. Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim at the 36th Asia-Pacific Roundtable in Kuala Lumpur. Credit: Xinhua/Cheng Yiheng.

dissipated. They are only united by the common threat they face in the opposition, the Perikatan Nasional (PN, or National Alliance) alliance. PN is a formidable political force,

having made more inroads into the traditionally strong grounds of the PH and BN coalitions in the crucial state-level elections in August 2023.

“Matters of geopolitics and security of course still do matter, but unless they become urgent and inescapable, Anwar will remain focused on economic collaboration and development.”

Domestic politics will therefore continue to consume much of Anwar’s attention and energy. This is compounded by the relatively lack of senior leaders within Anwar’s unity government with significant interest and experience in the foreign policy arena – meaning that Malaysia will likely rely a lot on the prime minister to do the strategic thinking on foreign and security policy matters. Given all these considerations, Anwar can be expected in the near term to stick to established policy settings and also, to a certain degree, the reactive and unambitious character of Malaysia’s foreign policy. Anwar will prioritize economic deliverables to his domestic constituencies, and this is reflected in his emphasis on economic diplomacy. Matters of geopolitics and security of course still do matter, but unless they become urgent and inescapable, Anwar will remain focused on economic collaboration and development.

China, South China Sea, ASEAN

This ordering of priorities encapsulates, in a way, Anwar’s policy approach to China. Managing relations with China is without a doubt a topmost task

for any government of Malaysia. Economically, China has been Malaysia’s largest trading partner for more than a decade, and also a significant source of investment and tourism. Malaysia also wishes to tap into China’s technological advancement to upgrade its own technological level. Malaysia therefore sees China as crucial for its own economic future, notwithstanding China’s own economic difficulties at the present time. Yet, in the South China Sea, China is Malaysia’s most acute source of security concern. China coast guard vessels maintain an almost constant presence in the vicinity of Luconia Shoals – within Malaysia’s exclusive economic zone but claimed by China as they fall within China’s so-called ‘nine-dashed line’. Malaysia’s oil and gas operations on the Kasawari oil field, also within Malaysia’s exclusive economic zone and China’s ‘nine-dashed line’ claim, has also faced regular intrusions by Chinese vessels.

Anwar visited China in April 2023, the priority being to secure investment commitments from China, while keeping the South China Sea

issue on the backburner. Anwar apparently made a passing comment about being ‘open’ to negotiation with China on the South China Sea dispute during his visit and meeting with the Chinese leaders, although the foreign ministry subsequently walked back from that position after the visit. Otherwise, Anwar’s policy stance on the South China Sea issue has been basically the same as recent previous governments. Malaysia will be firm in defending its own claim and maritime rights in the South China Sea in accordance with the international law and its own national law. Malaysia’s oil and gas operations within its own exclusive economic zone in the South China Sea will not be deterred by the presence of the Chinese vessels. Malaysia does not recognise the legitimacy of China’s claim. Accordingly, Malaysia sees the presence of Chinese vessels within Malaysian waters as unlawful intrusions, and diplomatic notes are constantly sent to China to register Malaysia’s protest and disapproval. However, Malaysia understands the sensitive nature of this delicate situation and has preferred to generally adopt a low-profile approach



31 March 2023, Beijing, China. Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim meeting Chinese President Xi Jinping. Credit: PMO Malaysia.

“...the South China Sea dispute remains Malaysia’s sharpest and most immediate security concern.”

to the intrusions. It deploys its own naval assets to monitor the presence and movement of the Chinese vessels, but will react strongly only when it feels it is absolutely necessary. Malaysia aspires to sustain a posture of seeking friendly relations with China, notwithstanding the South China Sea dispute, and in return, it expects China to exercise some kind of restraints towards Malaysia.

This approach has so far served the purpose of stabilising the Malaysia-China dispute in the South China Sea and allows both countries to detach the dispute to some extent from the wider relationship, especially its economic dimensions. Given his current focus on economic diplomacy, Anwar finds the existing low-profile approach to the South China Sea dispute largely acceptable.

Of course, Malaysia understands that China remains capable of being far more aggressive than it is now in the South China Sea, and is not oblivious to the modernisation needs of its military. Despite facing other pressing budgetary priorities, the Anwar government, in March 2023, increased Malaysia’s defence budget to MYR17.74 billion (USD3.97 billion), a 10 percent increase from the previous year and also the largest allocation since 2017. The increased budget will go to address the modernisation efforts of the navy and air force, in particular. The long-awaited procurement of light fighter aircraft, for example, was finalised

in early 2023, with Malaysia opting for the South Korean FA-50 fighters. Defence cooperation with the US remains strong and steady, with regular and frequent joint military exercises. These exercises are not explicitly directed at China, but the resulting capability improvements are certainly meant to enhance Malaysia’s ability to cope with possible escalation in its dispute with China in the South China Sea. And despite the Anwar government’s continuing differences with Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States over the AUKUS development, Malaysia has and will continue to maintain close security partnerships with all three countries.

Sustainable solutions to the South China Sea dispute remain as elusive as ever; and the focus now is to conclude the Code of Conduct (COC) among China and the ASEAN states as a way to ease the management of the dispute over the longer term. Malaysia is committed to the COC

process. It will assume the chair of ASEAN in 2025, and will certainly wish that the COC be concluded in that year (if not before), but it has no illusions of the great difficulties and divergences of views that the COC process continues to face.

Pending the COC conclusion, the South China Sea dispute remains Malaysia’s sharpest and most immediate security concern. Other than the South China Sea, Malaysia is also involved in several disputes with neighbouring countries, most of which are dormant or unlikely to cause problems, but some could also trigger security concerns if not managed well. The Philippines refusal to drop its claim on Sabah continues to irritate Malaysia, but more troublesome is the ‘private’ action by the descendants of the Sulu Sultanate to repossess Sabah. In 2013, Sulu militants infiltrated Sabah with the aim of occupying it, which was the most serious security incident Malaysia experienced in decades.



13 August 2023. Port Dickson, Malaysia. Opening ceremony of Exercise Keris Aman 23. Credit: US Marine Corps/Lance Cpl John Hall.

Militant activities and piracy, especially on the east coast of Sabah, remain an ongoing security challenge for Malaysia. The Sulu descendants have also pursued legal channels, seizing Malaysian assets and using some European courts to compel an arbitration award that was favourable to them. The Malaysian government managed to squash that award in a legal victory in the Paris Court of Appeal in June 2023.

Malaysia and Indonesia managed to conclude two maritime boundary treaties, concerning the areas in the southern part of the Strait of Malacca and in Sulawesi Sea. The technical aspects of these agreements were basically finalised in 2018, but the formal signing off of the boundary treaties was only achieved during Anwar's visit to Indonesia in June 2023. Not all disputes between Malaysia and Indonesia have been resolved, but the conclusion of these two agreements has removed one potential irritant in bilateral relations. The agreements however elicited criticisms from the former Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin, who is also a political heavyweight in the PN opposition. Muhyiddin attacked Anwar for being soft or negligent on issues involving sovereignty and security.

US-China Rivalry

Beyond the immediate neighbourhood, Malaysia, like many other countries, is most concerned about the competitive security dynamics between the US and China. While Malaysia does benefit materially to a certain extent from the US-China rivalry, in terms of increased investments that would have gone to or stayed in China if not because of the geopolitical risks, ultimately the increasingly tense geopolitical trend is not something that Malaysia welcomes. Malaysia has consistently insisted that it does

not wish to 'choose'. Both the US and China have also repeatedly insisted that they are not seeking to force countries to choose a side. But the geopolitical trend suggests that room for 'not choosing sides' is getting narrower. The Anwar government, for example, faced warnings from both the US and the EU, when it chose to allow Chinese telecom equipment builder Huawei to participate in the second 5G network rollout plan. Technological competition, Anwar has warned, should not lead to technological bifurcation that impedes progress.

The growing tensions between the two major powers over Taiwan are particularly worrisome, as all three actors involved in this issue have hardened their stand over the last few years. Beijing has stepped up its military exercises surrounding Taiwan and normalised the military activities that cross the 'median line' of the Taiwan Strait which it claims it never recognised. The US has introduced more and more elements of officiality into its supposedly 'unofficial' relations with Taiwan, which are dangerously close to the 'red line' as understood by China. Meanwhile, Taiwan, under the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) government, has grown more and more distant from China, with many symbols associated with 'China' being replaced and the populace more determined not to reunify with China. In Beijing's eyes, these developments are increasingly foreclosing the option of 'peaceful reunification,' and heightening the risk that the use of force will be inescapable.

Should a military scenario unfold over Taiwan it will be catastrophic to the economic security of Malaysia, as well as to the lives of its many citizens living on Taiwan (more than 20,000). Frustratingly, Malaysia has very few options of its own to affect the Taiwan

situation. It can only appeal, together with other countries (especially its ASEAN partners), to all three actors to moderate their behaviour and take concrete measures to stabilise the situation.

All things considered, the Anwar government will enter 2024 with much continuity in its foreign and security policy. Domestic politics will still command much of Anwar's attention, but the longer the unity government survives, the more confident Anwar will become of its stability and the more scope he will have to devote time and energy to the foreign policy agenda. Hence, it is possible that Malaysia's foreign policy will see more active initiatives in 2024, not least with a view to preparing itself for the ASEAN chair in the following year. In 2024 Malaysia and China will celebrate the 50th anniversary of diplomatic ties, and both countries will seek to enhance relations while carefully managing the South China Sea dispute, as part of a shared interest in avoiding incidents that will disrupt the anniversary. The elections in 2024, in Taiwan and the United States, will also be closely watched in Malaysia.

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Philippines: A New Leader and a New Strategic Policy

Aries A. Arugay

Since taking office in June 2022, President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. reoriented Philippine foreign and security policy toward new strategic objectives. In pursuit of what his administration deemed as independent foreign policy, he revitalised its alliance with the United States. At the same time, it has implemented a less accommodationist stance vis-à-vis China, particularly with regard to the South China Sea (SCS). Going beyond the US-China rivalry, the Philippines has also cultivated deeper security relations with other Indo-Pacific countries such as Australia, India, Japan, and South Korea.

Many observers both at home and abroad were caught by surprise with this strategic policy ‘re-pivot’ given that Marcos ran on a campaign of continuing the policies of Rodrigo Duterte. Under his strong man leadership, Duterte unconditionally embraced China while antagonising the US and the European Union. At one point, the populist firebrand president instigated the abrogation of the Philippines-US Visiting Forces Agreement, a critical pillar of the oldest military alliance in Asia. Under President Marcos Jr., the country regained its traditional stance of defending the international rules-based order with his ‘friends to all, enemies to none’ foreign policy doctrine.

Can the Philippines sustain such a policy under Marcos Jr. given a highly disruptive strategic environment rife with regional flashpoints? Can domestic politics distract the government from maintaining this policy direction? These are important questions that lie at the heart of the country’s security outlook which inevitably demands smart statecraft, bureaucratic coherence, and long-term strategic planning. But as a small regional power beset with political and economic challenges at home, the strategic fate of the Philippines is all too significantly subject to events and developments that it cannot influence or control.



3 June 2023. Singapore. Carlito Galvez Jr, Senior Undersecretary, Officer-in-Charge, Department of National Defense. Credit: IISS Shangri-Dialogue.

A more volatile regional strategic environment

While Marcos Jr. promised to maintain the policy preferences of his predecessor, his quick moves to re-engage with the US added new complication to how the country addressed its main strategic policy challenge: the heightened US-China rivalry in the Indo-Pacific. Anyone familiar with Philippine politics knows very well that the president, as its ‘chief architect’, has a huge say on foreign policy. In a way, strategic policymaking is as much a personal affair as it is the product of institutionalised processes.

There is more to this policy switch than a desire to personalise policymaking and an opportunity to promote his dynasty’s interests in the US. Since 2016, the Indo-Pacific region has become more uncertain in light of the worsening relations between US and China with other countries being dragged into this increasingly ‘unhealthy’ competition. As Marcos Jr. stated, ‘we are now confronted with a different and complex security environment, it brings with it new challenges that require us to adapt’. The major geopolitical challenges for the Philippines comprise not just the South China Sea but now extends even to the Taiwan strait. In a sharp

departure from his predecessor’s inclinations, Marcos Jr. is firmly of the view that closer relations with the US through a reinvigorated alliance is key to improving the country’s national security and regional strategic posture. The country’s chief executive declared that ‘I cannot see the Philippines in the future without having the United States as a partner. When we are in crisis, we look to the United States.’

This foreign policy ‘new normal’ is not simply the swing of a pendulum from China back to the US. This is a false binary as the Marcos Jr. administration has not thus far explicitly adopted a confrontational stance in respect of China. Moreover, his administration’s pursuit of strategic partnerships with like-minded countries and support for the international rules-based order conforms to the nation’s historical foreign policy leanings.

It could be perceived as politically ironic, but the 2023 National Security Policy (NSP) of the Philippines reflected similar dispositions to the Aquino II administration (2010-2016), the political nemesis of the Marcoses. External defence and regional security issues have replaced Duterte’s fixation with domestic law and order threats such as illegal drugs, criminality,

“The NSP also for the first time emphasised the strategic identity of the Philippines as an archipelagic and maritime nation.”

and communist insurgency. The NSP also for the first time emphasised the strategic identity of the Philippines as an archipelagic and maritime nation. This places safeguarding maritime borders at the heart of the nation’s security interests. As commander-in-chief, the president explicitly underscored that the mission of the military is territorial defence from foreign aggression. And at the present time the only threat to these borders is that posed by Chinese incursions in the West Philippine Sea.

Under Marcos Jr., Washington and Manila have implemented measures on alliance revitalisation through regular high-level exchanges and dialogue and increased security cooperation. An early outcome was the reinvigoration of the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) between the two countries. To the ire of China, EDCA implementation now includes an additional site in the northeastern frontier of the Philippines, proximate to the Taiwan strait as well as forming part of the ‘second island chain’ where China’s presence has already been observed. Once fully implemented, EDCA will result in the first major deployment of US troops on Philippine territory since American bases closed in 1992.

This ‘access’ granted by the Philippines was criticised by China as well as pro-Beijing Filipino national and local politicians who believed that this unnecessarily invited aggression



22 October 2023. Ayungin Shoal, South China Sea. Filipino sailors bumped by a Chinese coast guard ship. Credit: Armed Forces of the Philippines.

“...the Philippines under Marcos Jr. must ensure that it remains in charge and calling the shots as far as its own national security is concerned.”

toward the Philippines. In the end, given the clear position of Marcos Jr., these dissident voices did not prevent EDCA's revival. This policy setting was largely welcomed by the security sector, itself focused on accelerating the modernisation of the country's armed forces. In addition, a largely pro-American Filipino public agrees with this move given their severe and consistent distrust of China.

The Biden administration described the Philippines as an 'irreplaceable ally' and reaffirmed America's 'ironclad' security guarantee to the Philippines. These assurances explicitly extended to the South China Sea, as indicated in the Bilateral Defense Guidelines issued in May 2023. Serving as an update to the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty, this document also set out the trajectory envisaged for this longstanding alliance over the coming years that entails deeper strategic relations covering a broader range of contingency situations in the SCS such as attacks on non-military targets like coast guard vessels.

In less than two years, Marcos Jr. helped foment these promising developments directed at improving the country's national security. But as history would show, Philippines-US relations have been subjected to the ebb of dormancy and the flow of short-term intense activity. The key is to convert this momentum to institutionalised commitments that will prevent entrepreneurial political

actors who might lose focus or worse have interests inimical to a strong Philippine-US alliance.

A new approach to the South China Sea

To China's surprise and irritation, the Marcos administration continued and even expanded its approach to characterising its legitimate claims in the South China Sea. This new policy has three components: transparency, coherence, and collaboration. Unlike the Duterte administration that dealt clandestinely with China on this issue, the current government did not just silently file diplomatic protests regarding China's incursions in the SCS. Because of this, the entire world has borne witness to China's tools of harassment, intimidation and bullying such as lasers that seek to temporarily blind the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG), water cannons, and even floating barriers in Scarborough Shoal to prevent access by Filipino ships. As journalists can report on each instance of unlawful Chinese activity, it was not difficult to rally both domestic public opinion and even international support to the side of the Philippines. Marcos Jr. also did not hesitate to summon the Chinese ambassador several times to 'account' for such behaviour.

The most severe clash between the two countries since the 2019 ramming incident was in October 2023 when a Chinese Coast Guard ship rammed a Filipino ship on a rotation and resupply mission to the Ayungin/ Second Thomas Shoal which is part of the Philippines' exclusive economic zone. Such aggression was immediately revealed by the government and was immediately condemned by the country's allies and strategic partners.

This new approach was also seen as more coherent with the entire government speaking with one voice rather than the confusing cacophony of contradictory bureaucratic positions

that one saw during the Duterte administration. And finally, rather than treat this as a matter solely between China and the Philippines, the Marcos administration welcomes assistance from other like-minded countries in improving its maritime security in the SCS.

Marcos Jr.'s new SCS policy seems to be delivering substantial gains as the Philippines has caught the world's attention by being as a small country with a highly limited security sector standing up to an assertive superpower in the SCS. Sceptics, including pro-Beijing voices, however, are wary that this is a dangerous move as it can invite further escalation as the superpower is unlikely to de-escalate its manoeuvres in the SCS. However, the main challenge seems to lie in the ability of the Philippines to maintain control of its strategy in the SCS and not to be lured by other major powers to do things that may not serve the country's interests. Similarly, the generous supply of hardware and other forms of security assistance to the Philippines to improve its maritime situation must be also carefully processed and incorporated into its own defence planning. In other words, the Philippines under Marcos Jr. must ensure that it remains in charge and calling the shots as far as its own national security is concerned.

More strategic partners

Many did not anticipate that Marcos Jr. would open the door to deeper security cooperation between the Philippines and other countries in the Indo-Pacific. Rather than be trapped in the US-China dichotomy, the country has embarked on enhanced strategic partnerships with like-minded countries. For example, the Philippines and Australia have elevated their relationship to a comprehensive partnership this year. With an active status of visiting forces agreement, this will facilitate a richer program of



8 September 2023. Manila, Philippines. Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. sign a strategic partnership agreement. Credit: Anthony Albanese / Twitter.

exchanges between the two countries in the defence and security field but also in other areas such as economics and people-to-people exchanges.

The Philippines also achieved a new milestone in its security relationship with Japan. In light of shared security concerns over China's aggressive behaviour in the region, the two countries have instigated negotiations for a Reciprocal Access Agreement, a new defence pact that will simplify and facilitate the interaction of their defence forces. As a highly favoured nation in the Philippines, Japan has consistently remained a reliable economic partner and aid provider for the country. Under Marcos Jr., the Philippines is implementing multiple infrastructure projects with assistance from Japan. This becomes more salient as the Philippines is reducing its exposure to China's Belt and Road Initiative this year.

Further, the Philippines is exploring deeper security relations with India, South Korea, and with its fellow ASEAN member-states. For the Marcos Jr. administration, while the US remains an important pillar of its national security strategy, this complementary diversification strategy is meant to safeguard against the possible revival of the uncertainty experienced with the US in the recent

past. For example, the trilateral security cooperation between the Philippines, Japan, and Australia is considered to have significant potential as a security minilateral in the region.

Challenges and prospects

In a marked departure from its Southeast Asian neighbours, the Philippines under Marcos Jr. did not engage in 'strategic decoupling', meaning they engaged China on the economic front while rebuilding on security cooperation with the US. For several reasons, this approach did not work for the country when Duterte was president. While China remains the country's largest trade partner, the new government does not seem to be comfortable with China's significant capacity for economic coercion coupled with its growing assertiveness in advancing its maritime interests. As the Philippines maintains this relatively bolder course of action, it must have contingency measures in place in case China escalates and brings other 'weapons' from its diverse superpower arsenal into play.

While the Marcos Jr. administration is dependent on the US, it must also ensure that it will not be more reliant on this superpower for its security than is absolutely necessary. As seen before, domestic politics can rapidly

change US attention and strategy in the Indo-Pacific. But the pivotal role of domestic distractions is a two-way street. In the past, internal politics also affected the ability of the Philippines to conduct a consistent foreign policy. If Marcos Jr. faces political troubles at home, it might impair his ability to help promote the country's interests and by extension, contribute toward stability in the Indo-Pacific. To avoid this, the US and other like-minded states should strive to complement their security assistance with viable socioeconomic ventures that contribute to public order and stable governance. If the economic outlook is persistently negative, the resolve and commitment of Filipino political elites might waver. In the end, while SCS maritime issues are a primary concern, the Philippines is also beset with other challenges within the security-development nexus: internal peace and order, terrorism, criminality, natural disasters, food, and energy insecurity, among others.

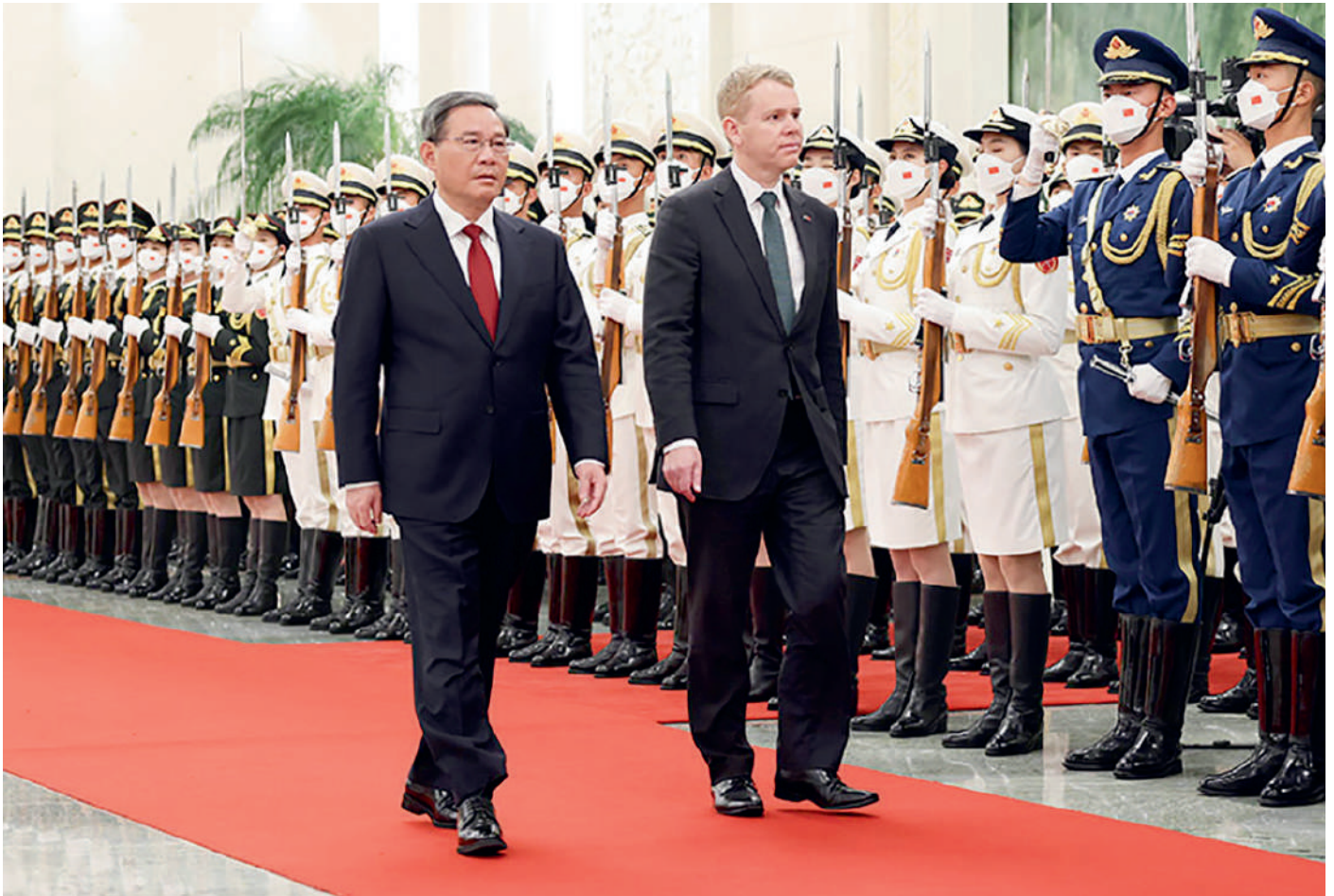
There is little doubt that the Marcos Jr. administration achieved substantial gains on the strategic policy front. This involved a major commitment from the entire government and it remains to be seen whether the momentum can be sustained. Marcos Jr. must exercise effective discipline and control within his government and other political allies. The effectiveness of Beijing's relentless influence operations in building pro-Chinese sentiment within the country's political elites should not be underestimated. This needs to be recognised by the government as a threat to national security. Not doing so can jeopardise its current strategic policy. Who needs enemies from the outside when your own people are the ones undermining the country's security interests?

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New Zealand: Coming to Terms With a More Challenging Security Environment

David Capie



28 June 2023. Beijing, China. Chinese Premier Li Qiang holds talks with then Prime Minister of New Zealand Chris Hipkins. Credit: Xinhua.

New Zealand's 2023 began with dramatic upheaval at home, with the surprise resignation of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern on 19 January. Ardern had overseen New Zealand's effective management of the COVID-19 pandemic and rightly earned acclaim for her response to the Christchurch mosque attacks in 2019. No previous New Zealand prime minister had enjoyed such a high profile on the international stage, but Ardern's popularity had fallen steadily since she won a landslide election in September 2020. She

returned after the summer break saying she no longer had enough 'gas in the tank' to carry on in the job. Her replacement was Chris Hipkins, who announced his government would focus on the 'bread and butter' issues that affected ordinary New Zealanders.

But if the new prime minister wanted to prioritise domestic issues ahead of an October general election, regional and international security issues continued to intrude. Fallout from Russia's invasion of Ukraine

impacted on energy and food prices. New Zealand imposed a further eight rounds of sanctions on Russia in 2023. Notably, for the first time, the government also used legislation to impose sanctions on Iranian companies for providing military assistance to Russia.

Unsurprisingly the new prime minister's first overseas trip was to Canberra. Relations with Australia, which had cooled over differences about Australia's treatment of New Zealand citizens and the deportation

“New Zealand’s relationship with China remained a complex and challenging one in 2023.”

of so-called ‘501’ criminals, had warmed quickly since Anthony Albanese’s Labor government had come to power. In April the two prime ministers met again in Brisbane where Albanese announced far-reaching changes that would offer a pathway to citizenship for New Zealanders living in Australia. In July, the Australian PM visited Wellington to mark the 80th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two allies, as well as the 40th anniversary of the Closer Economic Relations (CER) agreement. Canberra might have had private concerns about New Zealand’s low level of defence spending and comparatively softer line on the challenges posed by an assertive China, but if so, any comments were made behind closed doors. In public, the talk was of shared values and interests and the warmth of the trans-Tasman ‘family’. The South Pacific in particular emerged as an area for closer security cooperation. Australian and New Zealand defence chiefs toured the region together, and in April the countries’ armies signed a new bilateral agreement to deepen cooperation, with the goal of establishing ‘interchangeability’ between units. The agreement also focused on increased engagement in the South Pacific, where the intent was to create ‘a routine and predictable rhythm of key exercises amongst Pacific forces’.

New Zealand’s possible involvement with the AUKUS technology-sharing

agreement also seized headlines. In March, visiting US senior official Kurt Campbell announced that Washington was keen to begin a new technology dialogue with New Zealand and Defence Minister Andrew Little responded that Wellington was ‘willing to explore’ participation in the non-nuclear ‘pillar two’ activities, including cooperation on cybersecurity, artificial intelligence and hypersonics. Whether all the government shared Little’s enthusiasm was doubtful, with Foreign Minister Nanaia Mahuta in particular less than effusive in her public comments. A small anti-AUKUS protest movement emerged calling for the government to rule out any involvement with what it called ‘an aggressive military pact’. Former Prime Minister Helen Clark added her voice to the debate, saying ‘we are all acutely aware of changes in the geopolitical environment, but entanglement with AUKUS isn’t [the] response New Zealand needs’. Duelling op-eds argued in favour and against involvement with pillar two, but with few details about what precisely might be involved, or what the cost might be, the year ended with little clarity.

New Zealand’s relationship with China remained a complex and challenging one in 2023. As was the case in other liberal democracies, public opinion polling showed continuing low levels of favourability for China. An annual survey carried out by the Asia New Zealand Foundation revealed that more New Zealanders regarded China as a ‘threat’ (37%) than a ‘friend’ (30%). New Zealanders also saw it as one of the least ‘trustworthy’ major powers, with only 13% of respondents expressing having trust in China to ‘act responsibly in the world’. No single issue was responsible for the shift in public opinion, but analysts pointed to Beijing’s economic coercion

of Australia, human rights issues and a growing presence in the South Pacific as some of the key causes.

In March, Foreign Minister Mahuta travelled to Beijing where she met with her counterpart Qin Gang. Mahuta later described the talks as ‘very robust’, alluding to the growing number of points of friction between the two countries. Increasingly the New Zealand government has come to refer to the relationship as a ‘mature’ or ‘complex and evolving’ one, stressing that it wants to be a ‘consistent, predictable and respectful’ partner, engaging and cooperating where there is common interest, while standing up for important interests and values. Differences notwithstanding, trade continued to be a vital connection. By the start of 2023 China accounted for a third of all New Zealand exports, despite the government frequently calling for businesses to diversify and reduce their exposure to the China market.

The importance of the economic relationship was underscored when Hipkins visited Beijing in July. Along with a large media contingent, he took a 29-strong business delegation, including representatives of some of New Zealand’s largest companies. As Jason Young noted, ‘the PM’s trade delegation to China [was] driven by pragmatic New Zealand interest in an election year revolving around economic concerns.’ The goal was ‘to stabilise relations with a more challenging partner to promote New Zealand business interests.’ Meetings with Xi Jinping and Premier Li Qiang were cordial, and the visit produced agreements on science, agriculture and education cooperation, but none of the grand announcements that had marked the heady days of the bilateral relationship under former Prime Minister John Key.

Calls for trade diversification were given a boost in the middle of

“The Foreign Ministry [identified] three big shifts in the world: a move ‘from rules to power’, from ‘economics to security’, and from ‘efficiency to resilience’.”

the year, when Hipkins travelled to Brussels to sign a free trade agreement with the European Union. Critics called it a poor deal for its exclusion of key agricultural products, while advocates welcomed it as a positive breakthrough, especially given the rising tide of protectionism worldwide. An agreement with the post-Brexit United Kingdom elicited more enthusiasm, with the market access outcomes described by Hipkins as ‘among the very best New Zealand has secured in any trade deal.’ Closer to home New Zealand continued to take part in negotiations around the nascent Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), and chaired the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) Commission, which saw the accession of the United Kingdom, as well as applications from China and Taiwan. But even in Europe, Hipkins’ could not avoid Indo-Pacific security concerns. From Brussels he travelled to the NATO Summit in Vilnius, where he joined the Japanese, South Korean and Australian leaders as members of the alliance’s nascent Indo-Pacific (IP4) grouping.

The balancing act that New Zealand was attempting came into sharpest relief when Hipkins’ government released a slew of national security documents in August, all of which pointed to a much more challenging and worrying external environment.

New Zealand has tended to shy away from strategy documents – between 1999 and 2023 it published just two defence white papers – but the last few months of the Labour government saw the release of an inaugural National Security Strategy, a Foreign Ministry Strategic Foreign Policy Assessment, a Defence Strategic Policy Statement, a set of principles for the future shape of the Defence Force, and a first-ever public version of the New Zealand Security Intelligence Service’s annual threat assessment.

The Foreign Ministry assessment painted a bleak picture of global affairs, identifying three big shifts in the world: a move ‘from rules to power’, from ‘economics to security’, and from ‘efficiency to resilience’. Collectively, it argued these changes mean ‘many of the assumptions in relation to global and regional affairs that have underpinned New Zealand’s foreign policy for a generation or more are coming under real and sustained pressure.’

On the shift from rules to power, the assessment argued Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has reshaped the global landscape. It used the well-worn ‘certain countries’ formulation to discuss the growing use of coercion worldwide, but pointedly noted the ‘Chinese government has more assertively pursued diplomatic, trade, security and development initiatives aimed at enhancing China’s influence, shaping international approaches, challenging international rules and norms, and promoting China’s vision in these areas.’

The 2023 Defence Policy and Strategy Statement was equally gloomy, warning that New Zealand ‘faces a more challenging strategic environment than it has for decades’. The two primary threats identified were climate change and intensifying strategic competition, the main driver

for which was China’s ‘assertive pursuit of its strategic objectives’. The statement said New Zealand would need to be more proactive to try and shape its security environment, focusing in particular on the South Pacific. The Defence Force’s ability to do that, however, was constrained by resources. Attrition levels in the armed forces reached record highs and the loss of skilled tradespeople meant three navy vessels spent much of the year tied up in port. In its May budget, the government approved an emergency injection of funding to address the looming defence crisis.

The unprecedented release of the NZSIS threat assessment focused on two major security risks: violent extremism and foreign interference. Of the former, the assessment concluded although the official threat was low, a terrorist attack was still a realistic possibility. On foreign interference and espionage, however, the statement was more explicit, noting that harassment, monitoring and surveillance of diaspora communities in particular was a growing concern. It identified China, Iran and Russia as states engaging in such activities.

If the government was more willing to talk openly about security threats, it also gave more attention to the need to work with partners to address global and regional challenges. During her time as prime minister, Jacinda Ardern was quick to point to the importance of the United Nations and multilateralism as well as stressing New Zealand’s independent foreign policy. In contrast, Hipkins used speeches to the China Business Summit and the New Zealand Institute of International Affairs to emphasise the importance of working with Australia, the United States, the European Union, Japan and others. Although the government insisted on the ongoing centrality of the



10 July 2023. Brussels. Former Prime Minister Chris Hipkins, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and Trade Minister Damien O'Connor in Brussels, after New Zealand and the European Union signed a Free Trade Agreement. Credit: Jane Patterson / RNZ.

independent foreign policy, ministers repeatedly stressed it ‘does not mean isolation, neutrality, or a fixed pre-determined view of how we will act on a particular issue. Nor does it mean ‘going it alone’.

If the release of a wave of foreign and defence policy statements briefly seized the headlines in August, the October general election was fought squarely on domestic issues: the cost of living, economic management, and Crown-Māori relations. International issues barely got a mention. The polls predicted a win for the centre-right National Party, led by former businessman Christopher Luxon, but when the votes were counted, National and the libertarian ACT Party fell just short of a majority, needing the populist New Zealand First party, led by former Foreign Minister Winston Peters to form a coalition government. Negotiations as to the exact makeup of the government were ongoing

as this chapter was going to press, but that didn’t stop some from speculating about whether the new government might change tack and take a ‘business-first approach’ to relations with Beijing. Only time will tell. Doubtless the new government will want to carefully manage ties with New Zealand’s most important trading partner, but given the range of emerging challenges the country faces, it seems unlikely that there will be a sharp deviation from the approach set out in 2023’s national security statements.

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Mongolia: Geopolitical Resilience Being Tested, and Sometimes Teased

Dr. Mendee Jargalsaikhan and Ms. Soyolgerel Nyamjav

Amidst heightened tensions between the Great Powers, Mongolia has shown its geopolitical resilience by pursuing independent foreign policies while cautiously mitigating the consequences of Russia's war in Ukraine. This is not the first time that Mongolia has experienced the intense geopolitical rivalry between the Great Powers. For centuries, Mongolia has navigated through this treacherous geopolitical landscape because of its geographical position among three major civilisations and two Great Powers. Mongolia's relations with and approach to the balance of power between China and Russia are of utmost importance for Mongolia's security and foreign policy calculations as well as the survival of its independent statehood. This concern is clearly reflected in Mongolia's security and foreign outlook of 2023. The country's political leaders have maintained close ties with China and Russia while pursuing proactive diplomacy

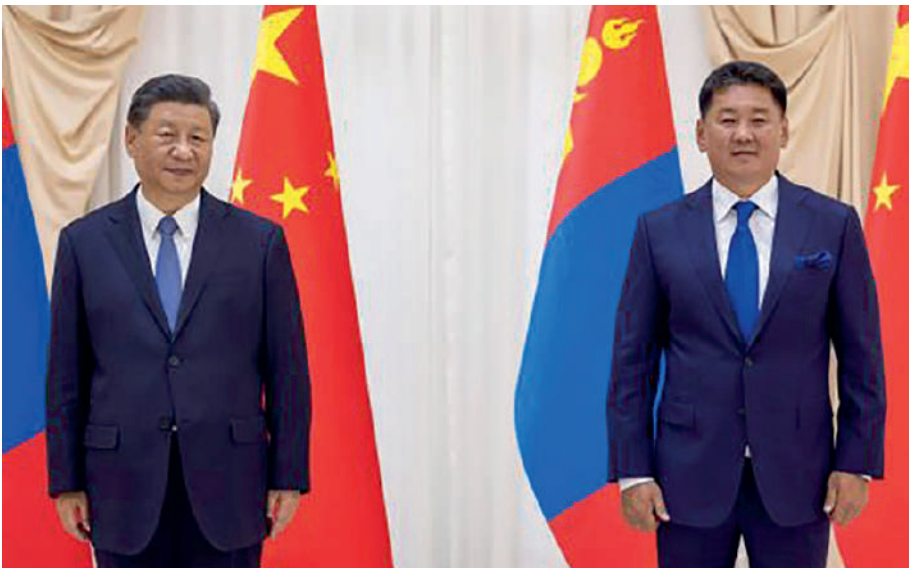
that reached out to distant partners as well as hosting multilateral activities.

Adhering to its bilateral treaty, traditional partnership, and economic security interests, Mongolia has remained mostly silent on Russia's expansionist war effort in Eastern Europe. At the same time, President Khurelsukh Ukhnaa spoke with Volodymyr Zelensky – who spent some of his childhood in Mongolia when his father had worked at a copper mine. Even though top politicians and the public are divided and debate openly about this war, the state policy prioritises neutrality and advocates an immediate cease fire and the negotiation of a peaceful settlement between the warring states. Mongolia has maintained bilateral relations with Russia at all levels and areas, including defence cooperation while accommodating a sudden influx of Russian citizens and cross-border traders. Mongolia

is also concerned about its imports of petroleum products, electricity and other critical materials such as fertilizers – for all of which it is heavily dependent on Russia.

For many Russians, especially those dodging military conscription, Mongolia has become a transit point for those intending to travel to third countries and a temporary home for those who want to stay in a neighbouring country. In the south, Mongolia has managed its relations with Beijing carefully because China is now the country's most critical economic lifeline. China is the only market for Mongolia's commodity exports and a gateway to world connections besides South Korea. Moreover, China is becoming the most convenient educational source for Mongolian students given its proximity and increased scholarship opportunities. As Mongolians become reluctant to travel to and through Russia because of the war, China is becoming an attractive tourism destination for Mongolian citizens.

The past year witnessed another interesting dynamic involving Mongolia's two neighbours. Russia's officials – for example, Prosecutor General Igor Krasnov and Alexey Tsydenov, Governor of Buryatia – openly made claims of increasing Western influence in Mongolia. The latter even tried to portray his allegation as comparable to Ukraine and its colour revolutions. Last year, Russian officials made claims about the operation of the US-sponsored biological labs in Mongolia and Kazakhstan. Although it is difficult to establish the true reasons behind such claims, they inevitably impact



16 October 2023. Beijing, China. Mongolian President Khurelsukh Ukhnaa and Chinese President Xi Jinping at the Belt and Road Forum. Credit: Office of the President of Mongolia.



19 June 2023. Five Hills Training Area, Mongolia. Member with the Mongolian Armed Forces (MAF) parachutes onto the parade deck during the opening ceremony of Exercise Khaan Quest 2023. Credit: US Embassy.

“For centuries, Mongolia has navigated through this treacherous geopolitical landscape because of its geographical position among three major civilisations and two Great Powers.”

negatively on Mongolia’s relationship with Russia. Furthermore, China has threatened to use its hefty economic leverage after Mongolia’s official announcement of the tenth Jebtsundamba Khutughtu – a key figure in the leadership of Tibetan Buddhism. This controversy could have led to the inclusion of Mongolia’s National Security Council Secretary, Enkhbayar Jadamba, in the bilateral meeting between Nikolai Patrushev, Russian Security Council Secretary, and Wang Yi, Chinese foreign minister and head of the Chinese Communist Party’s Central Foreign Affairs Office, in September in Moscow. To ameliorate the concerns of both neighbours, President Khurelsukh Ukhnaa met with President Xi Jinping and President Vladimir Putin in October on the sidelines of the third Belt and Road forum in Beijing and invited them to (separately) visit Mongolia in 2024.

While managing its relationships with China and Russia carefully, Mongolia has also energised its ties with the other states – including some who are in direct geopolitical competition with Mongolia’s two neighbours. The Polish President, Andrzej

Sebastian Duda, visited Ulaanbaatar to strengthen its traditional ties, which developed during the socialist period, and over more recent years when Poland has been an influential member of the EU and NATO. Following Duda’s visit, French President Emmanuel Macron made an unprecedented stop in Mongolia in May 2023 and President Khurelsukh Ukhnaa reciprocated the visit later that year, particularly to follow up cooperation in the development of uranium mining in Mongolia. In addition, Mongolian Prime Minister Oyunerdene Luvsannamsrai made official visits to South Korea and the United States. Declaring their strategic partnership with Mongolia, South Korea pledged to increase its bilateral economic ties, including exploration for critical minerals in Mongolia. US Vice President Kamala Harris welcomed Mongolian Prime Minister and issued a lengthy joint statement on the *Strategic Third Neighbour Partnership between the US and Mongolia* - a document highlighting Mongolia’s inclusion in the wider Indo-Pacific strategy as an important partner. Also, there are two interesting trilateral frameworks in place. One is the Japan-Mongolia-

US Trilateral Meeting and the other is the US-Mongolia-Republic Korea Trilateral Meeting. The latter trilateral meeting will also have a particular focus on critical mineral exploration. Like during the commodity boom in the late 90s, Mongolia could become another hot spot in the global competition over critical minerals, including uranium and copper. Unsurprisingly, 2023 also witnessed a careful balancing of these bolder foreign policy moves. Zandanshatar Gombojav, Mongolian Speaker of the Parliament, visited Moscow in June and the Chairman of the Russian State Duma reciprocated in September while the Prime Minister visited Beijing ahead of his visit to the United States.

Three interesting foreign policy strategies have been pursued in 2023. The first was the ongoing effort to promote Mongolia as a peaceful, safe location for multilateral dialogue and confidence building. The Institute for Strategic Studies, jointly with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, organised the Eighth Ulaanbaatar Dialogue, which welcomed policy-makers and academics from all regional countries, excluding North Korea, and delegates from Asia and Europe. The dialogue is now co-organised with the United Nations Department of Political and

“Mongolia considers its ties with Vietnam as strategic and long lasting as both country’s share the security concerns associated with proximity to big neighbours.”

Peacebuilding Affairs and UNESCAP and attracts high-level participants who wish to seize the opportunity to reach a broad audience. For example, this year, Nakamitsu Izumi, UN Under Secretary General and High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, Ambassador Kim Gunn, Republic of Korea (ROK) Special Representative for Korean Peninsula Peace and Security Affairs, and Seyfullah Hacimuftuoglu, Secretary General of Turkey’s National Security Council attended the dialogue. In

addition, Mongolian Foreign Minister Battsetseg Batmunkh hosted the Female Foreign Ministers’ Meeting – where North Korean Foreign Minister Choe Son-hui delivered her virtual greetings.

Meanwhile the Mongolian military hosted the Khaan Quest – an annual multinational peacekeeping exercise, which is becoming the only exercise where China’s PLA soldiers exercise with its geopolitical competitors, including India, Japan, South Korea and the United States. Besides these official events, Mongolian non-governmental organisations organised international events like the Ulaanbaatar Process, a civil society dialogue for peace and stability in Northeast Asia, and the Mongolia Forum on Northeast Asian Peaceful Development and Korean Unification. In fact, these events have been attended by interested scholars from China, Russia, and the United States – not least because rising geopolitical tensions have made direct interaction among them more difficult.

In the past, Mongolia’s events had been considered a unique platform for some Western, Japanese, and South Korean scholars because it welcomed delegates from North Korea and, sometimes, hosted bilateral meetings, especially between Japanese and North Korean delegates. In the same vein, Mongolia hosted Pope Francis in 2023 for the first official visit of the head of the Vatican City State as well as the head of the Catholic Church. Although Pope Francis’s four-day visit aimed to bless over 1400 Catholics living in Mongolia and many more who travelled from other parts of East Asia, including China and Russia, it was a key event in promoting interfaith solidarity. The Pope joined in the interfaith dialogue and met with the leaders of several religions, including shamans, Buddhists, Christians, and Muslims.

The second foreign policy strategy is Mongolia’s outreach to Kyrgyz Republic, Kazakhstan, Laos and Vietnam – countries that have had similar experiences in the past and are also coping with the



19 June 2023. Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. Eighth Ulaanbaatar Dialogue with policy-makers and academics from all regional countries. Credit: Mongolian MFA.

challenges of balancing relationships amidst geopolitical tension. Being considered the only democratic state in Central Asia, the Kyrgyz Republic encounters familiar challenges of populist politics, weak rule of law, small population, and economic dependency on China and Russia. Kyrgyz President Sadyr Japarov made an official visit to Mongolia and opened the Kyrgyz Embassy in Ulaanbaatar. Both states are looking forward to developing their bilateral ties. Mongolia and Kazakhstan are working to develop relations across all areas, especially in fields of economic and security cooperation. Although the statistics are not infallible, they suggest that there are over 60 thousand Mongolian Kazakhs residing in Kazakhstan, thus demonstrating already strong people-to-people ties. This is the largest Mongolian diaspora community followed by South Korea and Europe.

Mongolia's ties with the Kyrgyz Republic and Kazakhstan are particularly important within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, where Mongolia is an observer, and dealing with initiatives from a number of participants including China, Russia, Turkey, and India. Mongolia's relations with Laos and Vietnam have progressed significantly. Mongolia's state dignitaries, including the Defense Minister, visited Laos and Vietnam. Vietnamese and Laotian defence ministers promptly reciprocated these visits. Laotian Xaysomphone Phomvihane, Speaker of the National Assembly, also made a visit to Mongolia. Both states have maintained close ties since 1962, bonded by the shared geopolitical fate of being landlocked and buffer states – Laos between China and Vietnam in the 60s and 70s conflict and Mongolia between China and the USSR in the 60s, 70s, and 80s. President Khurelsukh Ukhnaa also made an

official visit to Hanoi and Vientiane to strengthen the bilateral ties with both countries. Mongolia considers its ties with Vietnam as strategic and long lasting as both country's share the security concerns associated with proximity to big neighbours. Furthermore, for Mongolia, both Laos and Vietnam are considered its traditional connection to Southeast Asia and supports its collaboration with ASEAN and its application for APEC membership.

The third and last foreign policy strategy is Mongolia's increased focus on international and regional platforms. Avoiding visiting great powers, Mongolia's president participated in the United Nations General Assembly in New York and Group of 77 Summit on Science, Technology, and Innovation in Cuba. Mongolia welcomes dignitaries from the United Nations family of organisation. Like the Non-Aligned Movement, the G77 is an important platform for Mongolia to voice its concerns and organising the event in Cuba provided another opportunity to strengthen Mongolia's old partnership in Latin America. Visits to Mongolia by senior officials from two international organisations made headlines in the local newspapers. One was Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of the World Health Organization, and the other was Ambassador Zhang Ming, Secretary-General of the SCO. The former is highly regarded by Mongolia's leaders as well the general public because of WHO assistance in addressing the COVID pandemic while the latter was treated more cautiously because of Sino-Russo influence in the SCO. Both the Mongolian President and Prime Minister attended the SCO summits, where both stressed Mongolia's status as an observer.

Mongolia's foreign policy behaviour of avoiding or minimising the risk of being caught up in Great Power rivalries, promoting itself as a neutral, peaceful, inclusive platform, and reaching out to international organisations and states with similar security policies are good indicators of the country's perceptions of the global security environment. In addition to ongoing conflicts between Russia and the US allies, relations between the US and China are also in bad shape. Given the Cold War-like rhetoric that has developed between Beijing and Washington, most regional countries, including Mongolia, hope to see de-escalation of the current tension. At the same time, Mongolia is cautiously watching the balance of power between China and Russia since their concerns, actions and reactions in the security and foreign policy sphere shapes the overarching security environment for Mongolia. The most complicated geopolitical setting is when Mongolia's two giant neighbours are in direct conflict – and Ulaanbaatar faces the strongest pressure to choose a side. The other challenging scenario is when both or either China and Russia fall into geopolitical competition with Mongolia's third neighbours – mostly developed democracies and OECD members. Mongolia is now operating in the latter setting – which requires it to increase its resilience while sustaining good relations with all countries.

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Laos: Protecting Regional Stability and Prosperity in the Evolving Geopolitical Landscape Tests ASEAN Centrality

CSCAP Laos



18 August 2023. Semarang, Indonesia. Secretary-General of ASEAN Dr Kao Kim Hourn met with Lao PDR's Minister of Industry and Commerce Malaithong Kommasith. Credit: ASEAN.

The doctrine of 'ASEAN Centrality,' a cornerstone of the ASEAN Charter, has been pivotal to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' considerable influence in regional geopolitics. Founded in 1967, ASEAN was established with the ideals of fostering peace, stability, and economic prosperity within Southeast Asia. This principle of centrality posits ASEAN as the primary engine for regional endeavours involving external powers to foster peace and stability, underpinning a framework that is open, transparent, and inclusive, as outlined in Paragraph 15 of the ASEAN Charter.

Historically, ASEAN has effectively broadened its membership, cultivated regional unity, and has

been instrumental in resolving conflicts. These accomplishments underscore ASEAN's unique diplomatic acumen and its members' commitment to collective goals. However, as the geopolitical terrain becomes more complex, with heightened tensions among global superpowers, the principle of ASEAN Centrality is being tested as never before.

The ASEAN Centrality: a core principle guiding regional cooperation

Over the years, ASEAN has steadfastly upheld the principle of ASEAN Centrality, effectively positioning itself as the linchpin of intergovernmental cooperation in

Southeast Asia. By spearheading regional cooperation initiatives, ASEAN has not only diversified its membership but also significantly enhanced its capacity to cultivate a sense of unity and cohesion among Southeast Asian nations. Through a commitment to dialogue and consensus, ASEAN has adeptly managed territorial disputes, acting as a neutral mediator to defuse potential conflicts. This proactive engagement has been instrumental in preserving peace and stability in a region marked by diverse political, cultural, and historical backgrounds.

The principle of ASEAN's centrality has demonstrated its efficacy in mitigating potential conflicts and fortifying regional security amidst

“This principle of centrality posits ASEAN as the primary engine for regional endeavours involving external powers to foster peace and stability...”

the South China Sea disputes. This is evidenced by the united approach taken in initiatives such as the 1992 ASEAN Declaration on the South China Sea, which advocated for the resolution of disputes through peaceful means. It has also enabled dialogue with China, leading to the creation of the ASEAN-China Working Group on the Regional Code of Conduct. Furthermore, ASEAN's collective stance facilitated the signing of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea in 2002, setting a framework for managing tensions and promoting stability in the region.

As a result, ASEAN's role in conflict management has contributed to the broader context of regional security that underpins socio-economic development. With a stable environment, member countries have been able to advance economically and socially, contributing to the collective growth of the region. This concerted effort towards economic collaboration and integration has been remarkably fruitful, leading to ASEAN's recognition as the world's fifth-largest economy.

In terms of its relations with external partners, ASEAN has excelled. This has been done through establishing several ASEAN-led or ASEAN-centric cooperation frameworks, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the East Asia Summit (EAS). These

frameworks enable ASEAN to engage major global powers and manage their interactions in the region. These mechanisms have not only deepened but also broadened cooperation, offering mutual benefits to both ASEAN and its external partners. ASEAN proudly stands as a key regional actor, advocating an ASEAN-centric approach to regional security and economic processes.

ASEAN Centrality extends beyond the economic and security realms, notably encompassing humanitarian efforts in the Asia-Pacific region. The organisation's proactive and collaborative approach to crisis management accentuates its pivotal role as a responsible regional entity. For instance, ASEAN promptly delivered \$100,000 worth of Disaster Emergency Logistics System for ASEAN (DELSA) relief items to Myanmar following Tropical Cyclone MOCHA in May 2023, highlighting its dedication to regional humanitarian cooperation.

Furthermore, ASEAN's engagement in monitoring and reporting on regional disasters, as evidenced by the 31 incidents recorded in the first week of January 2023 alone, showcases its commitment to preparedness and response. Collectively, these actions, working through mechanisms like the AHA Centre, affirm ASEAN's importance in tackling shared regional challenges.

ASEAN's success in these areas is a testament to the strength of its centrality principle, which has enabled it to navigate the complexities of regional politics effectively. As ASEAN continues to evolve, it retains the potential to shape the geopolitical narrative not just in Southeast Asia, but also to assert its influence and promote a model of cooperation and mutual benefit more widely. This strategic vision for collective growth and

harmony remains at the core of ASEAN's mission as it forges ahead in the 21st century.

The challenges to ASEAN Centrality

The evolving geopolitical landscape in the Asia-Pacific is marked by profound shifts that have significant implications for regional stability. In recent years, the concept of ASEAN Centrality, which emphasises the central role of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations in maintaining regional order, has been under scrutiny. The apprehension among scholars and observers stems from a more intricate geopolitical terrain, now rife with increased strategic rivalries between major global powers. These powers are actively engaging in the region, seeking to sway allies and build partnerships through the establishment of novel cooperation mechanisms.

In this environment, multilateral and minilateral frameworks such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and the Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) security pact have come into play, ostensibly to promote stability and cooperation. However, they also reflect the strategic interests of the

“... ASEAN sought to strategically position itself to leverage its collective strength, fostering an environment conducive to investment, innovation, and inclusive growth.”

member countries. Such frameworks, while beneficial in terms of enhancing military and strategic collaboration, also have the potential to exacerbate regional tensions. There is a palpable concern that the intensifying competition among big powers could undermine ASEAN's unity and its ability to navigate these complex dynamics.

Furthermore, these alliances and pacts have triggered increases in military budgets to support the acquisition of advanced weaponry, which has resulted in an arms race, an increasing risk of miscalculation and military confrontation and the emergence of security dilemmas, where increased efforts by one state to secure its safety inadvertently create insecurity in others. This scenario complicates the diplomatic landscape and makes it harder for smaller regional countries to maintain a balance among powers.

The situation is compounded by the Korean peninsula, which has long been a zone of conflict, and non-traditional security threats such as

economic insecurity, cyber warfare, terrorism, climate change, migration among others, which add layers of complexity to the geopolitical equation.

The ongoing shifts demand a nuanced understanding and strategic foresight on the part of ASEAN and its member states. They must adapt to the evolving power dynamics and develop a robust strategy that not only safeguards their interests but also contributes to the maintenance of peace and security in the Asia-Pacific region. This might include reinforcing ASEAN's institutional capabilities, enhancing regional economic integration, and fostering a comprehensive approach to security that encompasses both traditional and non-traditional challenges.

For Laos, a small land-locked nation situated among some of the world's fastest-growing economies, recognises the necessity of fostering harmonious relationships with its neighbours and with its international partners. This diplomatic stance is crucial as Laos seeks to diversify

its relations not only with its immediate neighbours but also with global players, aiming at further promoting and maintaining peace and stability to create a conducive environment for development. Adhering to a foreign policy that leans towards collaboration rather than confrontation, Laos is charting a path towards achieving its political and economic goals. These objectives are closely intertwined with its ability to collaborate effectively with both regional powers and global players.

Confronted with the escalating tensions between the United States and China, Laos faces a delicate situation that has significant ramifications for both its own welfare and the broader ASEAN community, which it is set to lead in 2024. The ongoing rivalry between these global giants casts a complex geopolitical shadow over the region that Laos must prudently navigate. In this sense, it must balance its diplomatic relations to safeguard its national interests while ensuring continued economic growth and political stability. The task ahead for Laos



17 September 2023. Jakarta, Indonesia. Indonesian President Joko 'Jokowi' Widodo handed over the next ASEAN Chairmanship mandate to Lao Prime Minister Sonexay Siphandone. Credit: ASEAN.

is to harmonise these interests with the intricate dance of international relations, a task that is as challenging as it is critical for its future trajectory.

Testing ASEAN Centrality

The evolving geopolitical climate, marked by escalating strategic competitions, presents a litany of challenges for ASEAN's pivotal role in the Asia-Pacific. These challenges, rather than being seen as overwhelming, should be perceived as a crucible for testing ASEAN's solidarity and robustness. The unwavering commitment to ASEAN Centrality, shared by both ASEAN members and their external partners, underscores a collective determination to sustain the association's influential position. Despite the intricate security conundrums introduced by global rivalries, ASEAN's concerted and collaborative actions are central to its agility and enduring robustness. The steadfast maintenance of ASEAN Centrality is indispensable—it orchestrates the effective administration of regional collaborations and ensures balanced interactions with global powers. This strategic approach enables ASEAN to adeptly engage in international diplomacy and safeguard the interests of its member states against the backdrop of fluctuating global dynamics.

The direction taken by Indonesia on assuming the ASEAN chairmanship in 2023, exemplifies this strategic navigation. By shifting the emphasis towards enduring economic progress and highlighting pivotal sectors such as food and energy security, public health, and financial stability, Indonesia presented ASEAN as championing a proactive agenda. This initiative not only aimed to bolster ASEAN's position as a fulcrum of economic dynamism but also to anchor its centrality in the

face of geopolitical headwinds. By prioritising these key areas, ASEAN sought to strategically position itself to leverage its collective strength, fostering an environment conducive to investment, innovation, and inclusive growth. This forward-looking approach is indicative of ASEAN's resolve to not just weather the storm of geopolitical tension but to emerge as a resilient and unified front, steering the region towards becoming an axis of economic vibrancy and stability. The concerted push towards economic sustainability also serves as a testament to ASEAN's commitment to address both immediate and long-term challenges, ensuring that the region remains at the forefront of global economic trends while fortifying its members against the vicissitudes of international politics.

Recommendations for upholding ASEAN Centrality

To cope with the security challenges and ensure the continued centrality of ASEAN in regional security cooperation, a comprehensive set of recommendations is proposed:

First, enhancing internal unity and cohesion: To navigate the evolving geopolitical landscape successfully, ASEAN must value the diversity within the organisation while expanding and deepening its external relations. It is vital to enhance the effectiveness of ASEAN-led multilateral mechanisms, ensuring they align with international laws, the UN Charter, and the ASEAN Charter. This approach will bolster ASEAN's leadership in regional cooperation and contribute to the promotion of peace and stability in the region.

Second, avoiding alignment with major powers: ASEAN member states should adopt a neutral stance and refrain from taking sides in the midst of power competition among

major global players. This approach is essential to maintaining ASEAN's credibility and effectiveness. By remaining impartial and independent, ASEAN can ensure that it serves as a unifying force in the region, rather than being drawn into the strategies of external powers.

Third, implementing the ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific (AOIP):

as a shared goal for the region, ASEAN should prioritise the implementation of the AOIP. This framework offers a vision for the Indo-Pacific region that is inclusive, transparent, and based on respect for international law. Implementing the AOIP can help reinforce ASEAN's centrality and maintain its influence in the evolving regional security architecture.

Fourth, advancing ASEAN

integration: to further strengthen its position and influence in the region, ASEAN should accelerate the implementation of the ASEAN Community Vision 2025. Additionally, it should prioritise the tasks of the Working Group responsible for formulating the Post-2025 ASEAN Vision. These efforts will facilitate a more integrated and prosperous ASEAN that is well-connected with the rest of the world, thereby enhancing its role in regional security cooperation.

Fifth, upholding the 'ASEAN

Way': The principle of non-confrontation and non-interference, often referred to as the 'ASEAN Way,' remains relevant and applicable. It continues to guide ASEAN's approach to regional diplomacy and conflict resolution. By upholding this principle, ASEAN can maintain its tradition of peaceful coexistence and collaborative problem-solving.

CSCAP Laos.

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Study Groups are CSCAP's primary mechanism to generate analysis and policy recommendations for consideration by governments. These groups serve as fora for consensus building and problem solving and to address sensitive issues and problems ahead of their consideration in official processes. CSCAP currently has active study groups on the following themes –

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The CRSO is an annual publication to highlight regional security issues and to promote and inform policy relevant outputs as to how Track One (official) and Track Two (non-official) actors can, jointly or separately, advance regional multilateral solutions to these issues.

CSCAP Memoranda

CSCAP Memoranda are the outcome of the work of Study Groups approved by the Steering Committee and submitted for consideration at the Track One level.

CSCAP General Conference Reports

Since 1997, the biennial CSCAP General Conference, is designed to be an international forum where high ranking officials and security experts from the Asia Pacific region meet every two years to discuss security issues of relevance and to seek new ideas in response to evolving developments in Asia Pacific security. The forum is usually attended by approximately 250 participants; making it one of the largest gatherings of its kind. Through its publications, CSCAP's recommendations have been well received by the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF).



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