

# CSCAP

# REGIONAL SECURITY OUTLOOK 2022



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: The Chinese Communist Party 100th anniversary.  
Credit: Ng Han Guan / AP/dpa/picture alliance.

## Back cover image

Source: 8 August 2021. Tokyo, Japan. The Olympic flame is extinguished during the Closing Ceremony of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games at Olympic Stadium.  
Credit: Dan Mullan / Getty Images.

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## LETTER FROM THE CO-EDITORS

On behalf of CSCAP, we are pleased to present the CSCAP Regional Security Outlook (CRSO) 2022. Inaugurated in 2007, the CRSO volume is now in its sixteenth 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 2022 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 2022 do not necessarily reflect the views of the chapter authors.

Ron Huisken and Kathryn Brett.

## CONTENTS

### Regional Security Outlook

- 4 **America and China: Seeking an Updated Foundation for Enduring Engagement** – *Ron Huisken*
- 8 **The Indo-Pacific Security Outlook: An American View** – *Scott W. Harold*
- 12 **Intensification of Sino-US Strategic Competition and Regional Security** – *Zhao Minghao*
- 16 **Japan’s Security Outlook: Moving Beyond Thinking to Doing** – *Nobushige Takamizawa*
- 20 **India’s Evolving Strategic Perspectives** – *Dr. Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan*
- 23 **Russian Views on Developments in Regional Security** – *Vasily Kashin*
- 28 **The EU’s Presence and Strategy in the Indo-Pacific** – *Daniel Fiott*
- 31 **Canada’s Strategic Approach to Asia: A House Divided** – *Jeffrey Reeves*
- 34 **The Regional Security Outlook: A View from the Republic of Korea** – *Dr. Kuyoun Chung*
- 37 **Australia in 2021: Crossing the Strategic Rubicon, or Setting the Stage for Future Challenges?** – *Iain Henry*
- 40 **Indonesia’s Security Outlook 2022: Has the External Environment Become Less Benign?** – *Rizal Sukma*
- 43 **Thai Perspectives on the Regional Security Outlook** – *Kavi Chongkittavorn*
- 46 **Malaysia’s 2022 Security Outlook: Seeking Sanctuary through Talk that Differs from Actions Likely to Get Harder** – *Steven Wong*
- 50 **Singapore’s Regional Outlook: Geopolitical Flux and a Post-COVID Regional Order** – *Sinderpal Singh and Adrian Tan*
- 53 **A Philippine View of the Regional Security Outlook: Is Everything Back where it Should Be?** – *Herman Joseph S. Kraft*
- 57 **How has Vietnam Assessed the Non-Traditional Security Agenda since COVID-19?** – *Chu Minh Thao*
- 61 **New Zealand: Searching for a Strategy** – *Natasha Hamilton-Hart*
- 64 **Myanmar: A Tale of Two Governments** – *Arthur Swan Ye Tun*
- 67 **Cambodia’s Security Outlook** – *Deth Sok Udom*
- 70 **Annex: Selected Comments on the Rules-Based Order**



# America and China: Seeking an Updated Foundation for Enduring Engagement

Ron Huisken



6 August 2021. The 28th Meeting of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). Credit: ASEAN.

The US and China bookend the core bilateral axis in the contemporary world. This relationship became increasingly distant over the last 20 years and went into free-fall in 2017-18 when the Trump administration openly stepped away from the broad posture of engagement that had underpinned US policy toward China since 1972. The incoming Biden administration therefore inherited a badly fractured US-China relationship.

Somewhat ironically, as concerns about US-China relations mounted, a helpful source of restraint on the behaviour of key states emerged from a widespread propensity to engage in a fundamental re-assessment and, as necessary, re-calibration of linkages,

alignments and policy settings. The proximate trigger for this propensity, which underpinned much of the think tank and media commentary on major power relationships in 2021, was, of course, Biden's election win over Trump in America's presidential elections in November 2020. The alarmingly distinctive Trump administration, along with memories of Iraq in 2003 and the Global Financial Crisis in 2008 – all placed in sharp relief by China's spectacular surge to major power status economically, technologically and militarily – necessarily raised questions about the wisdom of continuing to look to Washington for support and leadership. Even though the established international order

had been indispensable in enabling this spectacular development – something openly acknowledged in China, even at the highest political level – it has in recent times been accompanied by progressively more clear statements that China would seek changes in the order to more fully accommodate its interests and preferences.

There was some speculation that Beijing also faced new and difficult judgements. This stemmed from international polling suggesting that its policy settings and style of implementation were alienating many global audiences. These audiences, in turn, wondered whether and how the CCP might respond: would it judge that it had decisive momentum and



elect to defer policy adjustments or would it reassess and pursue alternative strategies?

From the outset, the Biden administration made clear it agreed that the US posture of engagement toward China had run its course. It indicated that it broadly shared the thinking that had led its predecessor to dramatically recast China as a competitor seeking to comprehensively demote the United States from its position and status in the international system. The new administration believed that China was presenting itself as an ideological alternative to the prevailing liberal order and suggested that US-China rivalry could be characterised as centred on alternative systems of governance.

As always, the cumulative stresses and strains of the past rolled over into 2021 and continued to develop as well as to interact with new events and developments. Above all, the COVID-19 pandemic continued its relentless erosion of stability, prosperity and optimism around the world. A more specific concern was that both the US and China continued to engage in activities and rhetoric that challenged the status quo in respect of Taiwan, still indisputably the region's most sensitive and intractable issue. The South China Sea, similarly, continued to be an arena of relentless brinkmanship aimed either at driving or precluding acceptance of a decisive shift in the status quo. ASEAN was thrown off balance early in the New Year when Myanmar's military leadership made the seemingly indulgent decision to reimpose direct military rule. The coup was greeted with disbelief followed by determined opposition and escalating violence.

On the Korean peninsula, new developments foreshadowed

additional sources of future stress and danger. South Korea, no longer bound by voluntary missile development constraints agreed with the US, tested a nascent capacity to launch ballistic missiles from a submerged submarine, as well as air-to-surface and anti-ship cruise missiles. North Korea has pursued the objective of an SLBM for some years and is believed to be close to deploying a modified submarine with several ballistic missile launch tubes. In addition, North Korea unveiled a land-attack cruise missile, with a demonstrated range in excess of 1000 km, confirming that controls over its international transactions remain porous and that it can still access advanced military technologies. North Korea also reactivated its Yongbyon nuclear reactor and may be expanding an associated uranium enrichment plant. Ballistic missile submarines present major challenges for reliable command and control and may be systems at or beyond the technological comfort zones of both states. The deployment of such systems – but especially by states with a nuclear weapon capability – further darkens the outlook for stability and peace on the peninsula. We also saw America's determined but wrenching withdrawal from Afghanistan, along with its coalition partners. Although it was widely acknowledged that Washington had no attractive options, a frantic withdrawal with the acquiescence of the Taliban was hugely damaging to US prestige and made the new administration's already formidable challenges seem even more daunting.

The Biden prescription was conspicuously devoid of the belligerence that so often crept into the rhetoric of the Trump administration. But it could not easily suppress the major qualms about America that political leaderships around the world were

“What we have, therefore, is both the US and China saying that the rules-based order has been subverted, with the US highlighting, inter alia, the unqualified concentration of power in the Chinese Communist Party constitutes as an unacceptable threat to fair competition with private enterprise in the West while China insists, also inter alia, that western notions of democracy and human rights are now so entrenched that they cast a pejorative cloud over its own system of governance even though it performs effectively against ‘collective’ variants of these essential qualities.”

grappling with, especially as major tests of this new posture loomed – an intention to revive the Quad process in the Indo-Pacific; a G7 meeting; and a NATO summit. A key strand

of the administration's countervailing strategy, both in the short term and extending into the indefinite future, was the re-invigoration of the alliance system. This emphasis on allies was, of course, also an indirect acknowledgement of the scale, scope and maturity of the challenge from China.

Although there was unmistakably hesitation in some quarters, Washington encountered a strong residual interest in re-engagement amongst its allies. The controversial Quad structure was reformed – meeting virtually in March and live in September 2021 – and promptly invested with accomplishments and responsibilities, albeit with a deliberately broad and more stable footprint encompassing the pandemic, climate change and supply chain integrity to complement its earlier strong focus on security. Similarly, the G-7 and NATO summits, in terms of atmospherics and the tone of the communiqués, were also more characteristic of the pre-Trump era.

The so-called rules-based order has established itself as something of a lightning rod in the dispute between the US and China. At an initial meeting of senior officials in Alaska in March 2021, the Biden administration sought to have the relationship viewed as a package of selected broadly agreed areas of cooperation alongside areas of regulated or bounded competition centred on economic performance. China had for a number of years flagged its reservations about the rules-based order simply by pointing out that it had not been present when the order was framed. In Alaska, however, it expressed a broader and sharper view, characterising the order – which even Xi Jinping acknowledged had been a decisive factor in China's spectacular economic success – as a hegemonic construct that precluded fair competition and looked to the

building of a new order devoid of these hegemonic characteristics. The CSCAP Outlook 2021 broadly anticipated this perspective when it assessed that China was now asserting that, although its system of governance was distinctive in a number of ways, it was unacceptable to in any way question its legitimacy or to portray it as having anything other than equivalent status to the western model.

This prospective insight into at least one aspect of China's difficulties with the rules-based order seemed to be confirmed in July 2021, when US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman became the first senior official to visit China for several months. China's Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, formally presented her with a package of two lists and three 'bottom lines' and suggested that the US needed to 'actively respond to' the package before normal business could resume. The first of these 'bottom lines' reportedly reads: *The United States must not challenge, slander or attempt to subvert the path and system of socialism with Chinese characteristics*. This statement confirms that China seeks formal acknowledgement of and acceptance that systems of governance other than liberal democracy/market economies can be fully effective across all criteria and should be assessed without prejudice.

What we have, therefore, is both the US and China saying that the rules-based order has been subverted, with the US highlighting, inter alia, the unqualified concentration of power in the Chinese Communist Party constitutes as an unacceptable threat to fair competition with private enterprise in the West while China insists, also inter alia, that western notions of democracy and human rights are now so entrenched that they cast a pejorative cloud over its own system of governance even

though it performs effectively against 'collective' variants of these essential qualities.

All things considered, China and the United States spent the greater part of 2021 posturing and probing for the high ground rather than engaging substantively on practical solutions to the problems bedevilling their relationship. Both sides declined substantive engagement in favour of persisting with clashing preferences on the terms for reframing their relationship. The virtual Biden-Xi summit on 15 November did not unlock this state of affairs. In the lead-up to the summit, both sides signalled that they wanted it to be a civil and positive encounter. That much was accomplished but both leaders were also careful not to concede on the attitudes and positions at the heart of the present impasse. The outlook, therefore, remained somewhat fraught, with the scope for further serious deterioration looking rather stronger than the prospects for constructive engagement.

We cannot delude ourselves. The differences in values and priorities, the associated differences in what is expected of the state and in the sources of the state's authority are real and deep. The Biden administration has steered away from the Trump era notion of economic decoupling but it remains committed to building more resilient supply chains for products deemed critical to national security and health (an objective highlighted by the Quad summit in September 2021). For its part, China has confirmed that the completion of the reform and opening up of its economy will be guided by its traditional preference for autonomy and independence over interdependence with and exposure to the international community. Something akin to 'decoupling', therefore, is very likely to be still on the cards. Such an





26 October 2021. 39th ASEAN Summit. Image Credit: ASEAN Secretariat / Kusuma Pandu Wijaya.

outcome would certainly diminish and very probably destabilise the regional order, especially if it is pursued as an objective in itself. Intriguingly, however, in September 2021, China took the potentially countervailing step of applying to join the CPTPP, the successor to the free trade agreement denounced by Donald Trump but described by his predecessor, Barak Obama, as ‘writing the rules of the global economy’. Separately, Taiwan has also applied to join the CPTPP, adding further layers of intrigue.

The judgement of political, economic and security commentators is all but unanimous: the events and trends of the recent past appear to have placed the tools, processes and mindsets that sustain order and stability in the Indo Pacific under alarming cumulative stress. The prospect of war is being spoken of more readily, and characterised as facing up to reality. We don’t want to learn retrospectively – a la Christopher Clark’s contention that the European powers in 1914

allowed mutual misunderstandings and unintended signals to accumulate as they sleepwalked into war – that a catastrophe stemmed from the coincidence of a permissive set of leadership attitudes – the product of isolation, expectation, impatience, hubris and the like – that some direct and frank exchanges might have readily dispelled. These stresses are not hidden or disguised. The Cold War resulted in the Indo-Pacific hosting formidable nuclear and conventional military capabilities. Then China emerged and engineered the fastest, sustained expansion of its military power to major power proportions in recorded history. And all sides are deploying these capabilities to prevent or provoke change. Both sharp surprises like AUKUS and the persistent calculated brinkmanship in the East and South China seas can be seen as warning signs that the potential rate of change to the status quo is exceeding the regions absorptive capacity.

It is imperative that the policy community in the Indo-Pacific region demands, encourages and facilitates efforts to probe, dissect and unravel the policy settings of the major powers and to develop the space for a coexistence that is stable, peaceful and competitive – in that order. Above all, this is a task that the ASEAN-managed multilateral security processes – especially the ARF and EAS – should and must be a prominent part of, not least because their inclusive membership is an inherent antidote to the forces of divergence that are currently so strong. These processes were created to lessen the risk of instability and conflict and to diffuse it if it occurred anyway. These processes are now mature and the challenge could hardly be more pressing. They must step up.

## Ron Huiskens

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# The Indo-Pacific Security Outlook: An American View

**Scott W. Harold**

How do US observers see the Indo-Pacific security outlook and what are the primary considerations shaping their assessments? Tensions in the region are rising and strategic trends include both negative factors and more positive developments. The most prominent factor attracting US attention is China's growing power and ambition, repressiveness at home, and aggressiveness abroad, particularly its threat to Taiwan. Other factors include North Korea's advancing military capabilities; diplomatic and governance trends in Southeast Asia; and the seizure of power by the Taliban in Afghanistan. US policymakers are also striving to deepen ties with Japan, the Republic of Korea, Australia, India,

and European partners, as well as encourage cooperation among these countries. Finally, COVID and climate change round out the policy challenges US observers are watching closely.

The rise of an aggressive, ambitious, revisionist China under Xi Jinping is clearly the leading factor in US views of Indo-Pacific security. The Interim National Security Strategic Guidance clearly identifies democracy as under threat from would-be authoritarians at home and actual authoritarians abroad. President Biden has spoken of the likelihood that the US – China relationship will be characterised by “extreme competition,” while Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines has described China as an “unparalleled” priority. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and Indo-Pacific Security Affairs Coordinator Kurt Campbell have clarified that the US believes it can pursue “competition without catastrophe” by rallying allies and partners to redefine the playing field

in ways that advantage the liberal international order, and Secretary of State Antony Blinken has stated that the relationship with China will be “competitive where it should be, collaborative where it can be, [and] adversarial where it must be.”

The PRC's belief that the US is its enemy; campaigns of genocide in Xinjiang and ethnic erasure against the Tibetans and Mongols (among others); systematic repression against Falun Gong; and deepening human rights violations against the Han majority have reshaped the debate over China in the US. So too has China's violation of its sovereign commitments to the United Kingdom and dismantling of freedom of the people of Hong Kong, as a result of which the US sanctioned 24 Hong Kong officials in April. China has also caught attention by engaging in hostage diplomacy; industrial-scale theft of intellectual property and cyber intrusions; and other violations of economic norms.



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18 March 2021. Anchorage, Alaska. US-China talks at the Captain Cook Hotel. Credit: Frederic J. Brown / AP Images.



China has been rapidly reforming and modernising the People's Liberation Army, which is tasked with being ready to "fight and win informatized local wars." The PLA's goal is to be able to "defeat, not merely compete" with the US in executing information systems-based system of systems confrontation and systems destruction warfare. Expert observers assess that a fair evaluation of the "military scorecard" would show that China's military power has been closing the gap with the US in a number of dimensions, and has been moving quickly to deal with the weaknesses in its "incomplete military transformation." Experts have noted important advances in PLA nuclear capabilities and "integrated strategic deterrence"; information warfare tools in the space, cyber, electromagnetic spectrum and psychological warfare domains; a growing penchant for conducting disinformation campaigns on social media; evolving logistics support for expeditionary operations; and

increasing use of grey zone operations in the maritime, cyber, and space domains. China's advances stem from investing greater resources, encouraging strategic distraction by the US and other nations and discouraging counterbalancing, and an aggressive strategy of military-civil fusion. Externally, the greatest prospects for a US – China conflict appear to be over Taiwan, in the East and South China Seas, on the Korean peninsula, in space or cyberspace, or possibly as a result of a clash between China and India. Among these, the PRC threat to Taiwan has garnered the most attention, with former USINDOPACOM Commander Adm. Phil Davidson warning in March that a conflict could come "within the next six years," and his successor Adm. John Aquilino arguing it could be "closer than most of us think."

In response, the US has launched a Pacific Deterrence Initiative, and is tightening its cooperation with allies and partners across

"the greatest prospects for a US – China conflict appear to be over Taiwan, in the East and South China Seas, on the Korean peninsula, in space or cyberspace, or possibly as a result of a clash between China and India."

the Indo-Pacific. It has also begun updating and evolving its approach to deterrence and warfighting in the region, including by transforming the approach to command and control as well as combat operations that the US Army, Air Force, Navy and Marines employ.

Even as US policy grapples with the continued rise of a revisionist China, it must simultaneously cope with a North Korean regime, aspects of whose decision-making remains difficult to shape or even predict. Pyongyang is currently rejecting dialogue with the US even as it refuses to follow through on its commitments to denuclearise. Instead, it appears to have restarted the Yongbyon nuclear reactor, and is continuing to expand its nuclear arsenal, which is driving at least four new policy challenges on the peninsula. Some US experts have argued for a Maximum Pressure 2.0 approach, while others worry that efforts to compel Pyongyang to denuclearise could ultimately prompt the very war they are designed to head-off.



22 April 2021. President Biden speaks during the virtual Leaders Summit on Climate from the East Room of the White House. Credit: Evan Vucci / AP.





A military evacuation flight from Afghanistan. Credit: PA.

Even as it advances its nuclear arsenal, the Kim Family Regime is also developing its conventional capabilities to threaten US allies South Korea and Japan, as well as US forces in those countries. The Kim regime's continued development of long-range artillery, multiple launch rocket systems, short-range ballistic missiles, long-range cruise missiles, rail-mobile and submarine launch platforms; its chemical and biological weapons programs; and its use of the nerve agent VX have all raised anxieties. North Korea's embrace of cyber tools for ransomware, bank heists, and cyber-enabled economic warfare represent another growing concern. Analysts have also warned not to overlook the threat the regime poses in terms of horizontal proliferation, especially to the Middle East. And behind all

of the regime's external threats lies the systematic brutality it employs against its own people that makes it one of the most repressive countries in the world. Indeed, Pyongyang's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, shutting its borders almost entirely, has likely dramatically worsened hunger and famine across the country. Washington has made clear it is willing to provide humanitarian assistance, but thus far the regime has shown no interest in talking or accepting assistance.

On Southeast Asia, even before taking office, experts on the region were advising the Biden administration of the need to be "realistic" about ties with increasingly pro-China ally Thailand, which was an early case of the region's democratic backsliding in 2014. The administration faced a crisis early on when the Myanmar

military launched a coup, ousting the government of Nobel-laureate Aung San Suu Kyi and reinstating mass repression.

While events in Myanmar started the year off on a sour note, Washington took a bold and positive step for the region in April, joining hands with its Quad partners Australia, India and Japan in announcing plans to provide Southeast Asian nations with up to 1 billion COVID vaccine doses. Progress on that initiative was complicated by the surge in Delta variant cases across India in late spring, but the US responded by accelerating vaccine donations abroad, leading to over 113 million distributed by early September.



In May, disaster struck for Indonesian submarine KRI Nanggala-402, which sunk during a torpedo drill. Unfortunately the US, Australia and other nations failed to step in to assist Jakarta, which ultimately turned to Beijing for help with recovery efforts, leading to a significant missed opportunity in the region. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin visited Singapore, Vietnam and the Philippines in July to deepen security ties, resulting in a successful visit that prompted Manila to restore the Visiting Forces Agreement and resume joint exercises. And Vice-President Kamala Harris followed up with her own visit to Singapore and Hanoi in August in an “important” signal to the region that the US will remain engaged, even after the fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban.

The sudden collapse of the Kabul government shook confidence in the Biden administration’s approach in some quarters, especially in the US, something China sought to play on in its propaganda. In East Asia, however, allies and partners in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan largely shrugged off facile comparisons to Afghanistan. Partly, this was due to the vast differences between these countries and Afghanistan, and partly to clear US signalling that the Afghan withdrawal was intended in part to facilitate a greater US focus on the Indo-Pacific. Indeed, in the weeks immediately bracketing the withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Biden administration announced a \$750 million arms sale to Taiwan; undertook the ninth transit of the Taiwan Strait by the US Navy in 2021; initiated a new AUKUS security partnership with the UK and Australia; and announced plans to welcome the leaders of the Quad to Washington for an in-person summit meeting.

Separately, the US has lauded the military visits to the region

by UK, French, and German naval vessels throughout 2021, participating in joint amphibious exercises with France, Australia, and Japan. Diplomatically, the Biden administration won supportive statements about the importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait from Australia, Japan, South Korea, and the G-7, as well as condemnation from many partners of China’s human rights abuses in Xinjiang. And it elicited significant cooperation on countering digital authoritarian technologies, including coordination on hampering China’s 5G strategy, putting in place moves to bolster US capacity in leading chip design and manufacturing, wooing TSMC to expand its commitment to build new production facilities in the US, and moved to cut off Beijing’s access to advanced node semiconductors as well as the hardware needed to make them.

Clearly, as the US donations of COVID-19 vaccines to South Korea (1 million doses) and Taiwan (2.5 million doses) show, Washington is striving to assist the region in meeting the threat posed by the global pandemic, including by vaccinating US forces in the region as well as contractors and their families. In some cases, the challenge posed by continued resistance to vaccination in some quarters in the US has complicated regional cooperation by raising concerns among allies about the US military as a possible vector for COVID spread. Separately, tensions with Paris over the AUKUS agreement and the cancellation of a French submarine sale to Australia similarly threaten to slow the building of regional and extra-regional cooperation. And in Northeast Asia, persistent frictions between the progressive South Korean government and Japan may require continuing US efforts to prevent them from spilling over.

Finally, US policy is seeking to build a broad coalition to combat global warming, including through dialogue with China, despite Beijing’s hints that climate cooperate “cannot possibly be divorced,” in Foreign Minister Wang Yi’s phrasing, from the need for US concessions on issues the PRC cares about. The Biden administration, however, has recognised that China will take steps to address climate change because doing so is in China’s national interest, and not as a favour or to reciprocate steps the US has taken. Moreover, China is by no means the only important counterpart on this issue, and the US has advanced important agreements on climate change and decarbonisation with ASEAN, India, Japan, and South Korea, among others.

The Indo-Pacific is witnessing greater tensions as more countries band together to push back against China’s increasingly assertive behaviour. Yet as important as it is, China is not the only country of concern in the region. The challenges of managing threats from North Korea, COVID and climate change—as well as addressing democratic backsliding and differences among US allies and partners—mean that Washington may need to continue to devote nearly as much attention to alliance management and diplomacy with partners as it does to marshalling its resources to meet the China challenge head-on. Increased self-confidence in the fundamental sources of US strength, paired with a national security strategy that asks more of allies and partners even as the US commits more of its own resources to the region, may hold the best promise of, as Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs Ely Ratner wrote in a 2020 report, rising to the China challenge.

**Scott W. Harold**

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# Intensification of Sino-US Strategic Competition and Regional Security

**Zhao Minghao**

When the Biden administration came to power, Beijing had hoped that it would help ease the tension in Sino-US relations. As China's State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated in January 2021, "China-US relations have come to a new crossroads, and a new window of hope is opening." However, things did not develop as Beijing expected. The Biden administration has pushed the strategic competition between China and the United States to a new stage, featuring aspects like the "position of strength" and "stiff competition". China also worked hard to create a new approach toward handling its relations with the United States. In September 2021, Chinese President Xi Jinping, also general secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee and chairman of the Central Military Commission, addressed the opening of a training session for young and middle-aged officials at the Party School of the CPC Central Committee. Xi emphasised that it was important to "cast away illusions and dare to struggle." Undoubtedly, the rising tensions in Sino-US relations will have a significant impact on the security of the Asia-Pacific region.

In the past few years, the Trump administration promoted fundamental adjustments in US strategy towards China, centred on the notion of "great power competition". From Beijing's point of view, many measures taken by the Trump administration amounted to declaring a "new cold war". The Biden administration, which came to power on 20 January 2021, similarly viewed Sino-US relations from the perspective of "great power



7 June 2021. Chongqing, China. Special ASEAN-China Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Celebration of the 30th Anniversary of Dialogue Relations. Credit: FMPRC.

competition." US President Biden made it crystal clear that China is America's "most serious competitor". He vowed to engage in "extreme competition" and "long-term strategic competition" with China from a "position of strength". It is worth pointing out that, as a Democrat, Biden's concept of competition against China has a strong ideological connotation. He characterised Sino-US competition as a contest between democracy and autocracy.

However, China's top leadership did not buy that. They could not accept a unilateral American decision to regard competition as the defining feature of Sino-US relations. In addition, phrases like "position of strength" sound very insulting to Chinese ears, especially as they tend to believe that China is "on the right side of history". In March 2021, Chinese Communist Party foreign affairs chief Yang Jiechi angrily told his American counterpart that "there is no way to strangle China". In response to human rights accusations

from the US side, Yang stated, "Many people within the United States actually have little confidence in the democracy of the United States." Most Chinese analysts believe that America would actually become more divided and inward-looking during Biden's presidency. US performance in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic and the democrats version of the "America First" doctrine pursued by the Biden administration, among many other un-America policies, fail to convince Chinese that the United State has, or can build, a position of strength.

Moreover, Sino-US divergences on the international order seems to be more salient. In March 2021, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated, "China is the only country with the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to seriously challenge the stable and open international system." In Beijing's view, the Biden administration aspired to forge a US-led bloc and advance coalition-driven competition



with China. On many occasions this year, Xi Jinping has talked about the concept of “genuine multilateralism”. It can be viewed as a response to the Biden administration’s call for a rules-based international order. Xi was clear: “There is only one system in the world, and that is the international system with the United Nations at its core. There is only one order, and that is the international order based on international law. There is only one set of rules, and that is the basic norms of international relations based on the purposes and principles of the UN Charter.”

In response to America’s competitive strategy toward China, Beijing is exploring a new approach to handling its more tense relations with Washington. In July 2021, when Wang Yi met with US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman in Tianjin of China, he underlined three basic demands as bottom lines on how to effectively manage differences and prevent China-US relations from spiralling out of control. The first is that the United States must not challenge, slander or even attempt to subvert the path and system of socialism with Chinese

characteristics. The second is that the United States must not attempt to obstruct or interrupt China’s development process. The third is that the United States must not infringe upon China’s state sovereignty, or even damage China’s territorial integrity. Moreover, the Chinese side presented Sherman with two lists: the “List of US Wrongdoings that Must Stop” and the “List of Key Individual Cases that China Has Concerns With.” These actions actually confirmed China’s new thinking and approach toward Sino-US relations.

In the same month as the Wang-Sherman meeting, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) celebrated its 100th anniversary in Beijing. In his speech at that event, Xi Jinping warned that foreign powers will “get their heads bashed” if they attempt to bully or influence the country. As always, domestic politics is the key driving force of Sino-US relations. In the autumn of 2022, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) will hold its 20th National Party Congress. Beijing can be expected to be most determined to avoid any signs of weakness when facing pressure from the United States. Similarly, the 2022

midterm elections will be a bitter political battle for Biden and other Democrats. They will not show a stance of detente to China, which may damage the already limited political capital between the two states. We can expect to witness intensifying Sino-US rivalry in 2022. More tit-for-tat practices could lead to more fluctuations in China-US relations.

The Indo-Pacific has been the central arena for Sino-US strategic competition, though Beijing and Moscow still prefer the concept of Asia-Pacific. Kurt Campbell, Ely Ratner and other core members of the Biden administration’s China policy team are eminent Asia hands. Washington envisions a more networked regional security architecture, combined with “integrated deterrence” against China, to maintain US primacy. The Biden administration upgraded the Quad mechanism, including its first face-to-face summit in October 2021. The four countries—Australia, Japan, India, and the United States—have set up several working groups to push forward with collaboration on protecting advanced technologies, safeguarding sources of rare earth metals and reshaping supply chains. The Quad countries conducted the Malabar naval exercises in August. The live weapon firing drills, anti-surface, anti-air and anti-submarine warfare drills, together with joint manoeuvres and tactical exercises, sent a message to China that the Quad is likely to also develop its military cohesion. Beijing has worried about the possibility of an Asian version of NATO based on the Quad.

The Biden administration is also working hard to forge a “Quad-plus” mechanism, pushing more allies and partners to join the bloc. South Korea, the Philippines and Vietnam are all potential recruits in Washington’s eyes. The Moon Jae-in administration has avoided putting South Korea



2 September 2021. Chinese President Xi Jinping addresses the Global Trade in Services Summit of the 2021 China International Fair for Trade in Services. Credit: Xinhua.

“He [Biden] characterised Sino-US competition as a contest between democracy and autocracy. However, China’s top leadership did not buy that. They could not accept a unilateral American decision to regard competition as the defining feature of Sino-US relations.”

in the middle of a strategic contest between the US and China, but elections in March 2022 could bring a new, more pro-American president to Seoul. The Biden administration is also trying to get European countries such as Britain and France to become part of the “Quad plus.” In particular, Britain is substantially strengthening its security ties with Japan and other Quad members by permanently deploying warships in the Indo-Pacific. Chinese strategists are even more alarmed by the Biden administration’s push to extend NATO’s area of interest to include the Indo-Pacific region.

However, the Biden administration still appeared to view the Quad as a thin grouping, which could not reliably deter China. AUKUS—a trilateral security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States—was established in September 2021. This arrangement centred on military deterrence and was considered by Beijing to be the embodiment of the “new Cold War”

mindset in Washington. Australia would not only possess at least 8 nuclear-powered submarines with support of the United States and the United Kingdom by 2040, but also host American fighters, bombers and advanced missiles on its territory. Although the Australian government claimed that it does not seek to acquire nuclear weapons, Canberra’s decision may encourage more countries to exploit this loophole in the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty.

Australia has been a pivotal actor in mitigating the tension between China and several members of the US-led alliance system. However, the AUKUS partnership has convinced Beijing that Canberra is determined to choose the pathway of hostility. As James Curran, professor at the University of Sydney said, it is “the biggest strategic gamble in Australian history”. The Morrison administration ostentatiously declared a “forever partnership” with the United States, but it opens the way for Australia to be involved in military conflicts with China. Besides China, ASEAN countries like Indonesia and Malaysia have voiced deep concerns over the AUKUS, as heralding a new wave of arms racing and a more hostile region. Dino Patti Djalal, former Indonesian ambassador to the United States said, “The picture is one of three Anglo-Saxon countries drumming up militarily in the Indo-Pacific region”, “The worry is that this will spark an untimely arms race, which the region does not need now, nor in the future.” Southeast Asia countries are worried that AUKUS and the Quad will erode ASEAN’s “centrality” in regional affairs.

The Biden administration’s Indo-Pacific Strategy tends to put more emphasis on military affairs. Yet the real challenge to regional countries lies in the economic downturn and non-traditional security fields. The COVID-19 pandemic makes these

challenges more prominent and urgent. The Biden administration has launched a “diplomatic offensive” toward regional countries. President Biden joined the virtual US-ASEAN Summit and East Asia Summit, announcing plans to provide up to \$102 million to empower the US strategic partnership with ASEAN. Senior administration officials have made frequent visits to Asia. However, Washington is still bound by domestic populism and economic nationalism, and it lacks effective economic instruments. The US “position of strength” in the region is far from what it has imagined.

On the other hand, Beijing seems to be quite clear about where the key arena of great power competition is located. It realises that the magic weapon for the long game between China and the United States lies in sustaining and expanding its economic integration with regional countries. China ratified the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) in March 2021. In September, China officially applied to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTTP). All CPTTP parties, including Japan and Australia have a veto on new membership. China is presumed to have incentives to improve relations with these countries. In November, China also proposed to be part of the Digital Economy Partnership Agreement (DEPA), which was signed by Singapore, New Zealand and Chile in June 2020. The United States remains outside all these economic pacts.

The Taiwan issue is undoubtedly the wild card in the Sino-US strategic competition and the security of the wider region. In August and October, US President Joe Biden said the US would defend Taiwan if Mainland China attacked. These public statements constituted a





28 June 2021. Beijing, China. Chinese President Xi Jinping during 100th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party in Beijing on June 28.  
Credit: Lintao Zhang / Getty Images.

dramatic departure from the long-held American policy of “strategic ambiguity” over the Taiwan issue. Beijing accused Washington of sending “wrong signals” to Taiwan. Although the White House and US Department of State insist that America’s one-China policy has not changed, Beijing is preparing for a big storm across the Taiwan Strait. In late October, Wang Yi met with Antony Blinken in Rome. He told his American counterpart that “the Taiwan issue is the most sensitive issue between China and the United States. If it is handled wrongly, it will cause subversive and overall damage to bilateral ties.”

As the Economist declared, Taiwan has become “the world’s most dangerous place.” In March, Adm. Phil Davidson, then US Indo-Pacific Command chief, said that an attack on Taiwan may happen

as early as 2027. US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said in July 2021 when referencing the Taiwan issue, “We will not flinch when our interests are threatened, yet we do not seek confrontation.” The Biden administration has been operationalising US commitments to Taiwan and reinforcing US-Taiwan military ties, including conducting monthly US warship patrols in the Taiwan Strait, enhancing arms sale to the island and deploying US special forces to train Taiwan’s forces. In October, Antony Blinken advocated a greater role for Taiwan at the United Nations. In response, mainland China apparently increased its military activities across the Taiwan Strait. The Chinese People’s Liberation Army reportedly sent nearly 200 aircraft to locations near Taiwan for exercises in October 2021. Obviously, the Taiwan issue has become the

frontline of Sino-US rivalry, and the risks of fatal conflict in the coming years should not be underestimated. The tension over the Taiwan issue must have enduring spill-over effects on regional security, and all parties need to find ways to prevent the “war” transitioning from cold to hot.

## Dr Zhao Minghao

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# Japan's Security Outlook: Moving Beyond Thinking to Doing

Nobushige Takamizawa

The general election in October 2021 gave an absolute stable majority” of 261 seats out of 465 in the Lower House, to the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and new Prime Minister Kishida Fumio, who won the LDP Presidential election just a month before. This ensured that the LDP continued to have the authority to chair all standing committees and allow ruling coalition lawmakers to make up the majority of the members on those committees. Left leaning opposition groups, namely the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDP) and the Japan Communist Party (JCP) lost more than 10% of their seats in spite of their “candidate unifying cooperation” in the single-seat race with the LDP.

What was particularly notable in this election was the remarkable rise of right-leaning as well as reform-promoting Nippon Ishin no Kai as a “third pole,” gaining 41 seats and surpassing the LDP coalition partner Komeito with 32 seats. There is an expectation that this emerging new political dynamic may help Japan to take action more quickly and decisively in dealing with a variety of intensifying security challenges. This will strengthen the LDP’s capacity to promote more robust security policy measures unless it loses support in the Upper House election in July 2022.

Just after becoming Japan’s 100th Prime Minister in September 2021, Kishida articulated his intention to review the 2013 National Security



6 August 2021. Mr. Motegi Toshimitsu, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Japan, attends the 28th ASEAN Regional Forum. Credit: MOFA Japan.

Strategy (NSS), the 2018 National Defence Programs Guidelines (NDPG) and the 2018 Mid-term (FY 2019-2023) Defence Plan. These policy documents address a range of fundamental and urgent security issues: Rejuvenating the Japan-US alliance, strengthening deterrence, dealing with China and the Taiwan issue in its all aspects, calibrating and building up Japan’s force structure, exploring and implementing measures of active defence, ensuring climate security, economic security, and health security as well as reliable global supply chains. On top of that, major challenges loom in the integration of overlapping initiatives such as FOIP, Quad, AUKUS, and the Democratic Alliance as well as at the nexus of the CPTPP, RCEP, BRI and other bilateral or multilateral arrangements.

Since President Biden took office in January 2021, major efforts have been made to reaffirm the importance of the rules-based international order and to revitalise cooperation among allies and other like-minded countries and partners. Japanese policy makers were cautious but relieved to see the US resolve to re-engage strongly with

Asia. The Biden administration used a variety of opportunities to convey this intent, including the US National Strategic Planning Guidance, two Quad Summit meetings, the US-Japan Security Consultative Committee (2+2) meeting in Tokyo and the Suga-Biden Summit meeting in Washington.

Among others, the Joint Statement of the 2+2 meeting in March 2021 highlighted China’s coercive activities and North Korea’s nuclear and missile development as well as the following commitments; Japan’s resolve to enhance its capabilities to bolster national defence and further strengthen the Alliance; America’s unwavering commitment to the defence of Japan through the full range of its capabilities, including nuclear; and renewing their commitment to promoting a free and open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) and a rules-based international order.

In order to ensure tailored deterrence and to undertake a comprehensive and integrated review of roles, missions and capabilities, it is vital for Japan, individually and collectively with the US to take a



“Whether or not the coming 2+2 meeting explicitly takes up a review of the 2015 Guidelines for Japan-US Defence Cooperation in the context of Taiwan, it is an urgent and inescapable issue on the bilateral agenda.”

hard look at developments in such areas as changes in China’s strategic calculus, the military balance between China and US and its allies, the impact of influence operations and effective response measures, possible threatening scenarios from normal situations to extreme cases, the relevance and roles of extended nuclear deterrence in the age of borderless and persistent grey-zone competition. Initial answers to these questions will be incorporated as the takeaways in a scheduled 2+2 meeting towards the end of this year. It will not be easy to come up with tangible steps to advance these shared policy priorities. It has to be accepted that, even assuming sustained political attention, this agenda will take considerable time to address. It is important, however, that it be addressed with a sense of urgency and a strong focus on actionable outcomes.

Taiwan has again become a topic of political and public debate in Japan, reflecting the political, economic and military situation surrounding Taiwan and, in particular, the concerted surge in activities directed at Taiwan by China and the PLA. In addition, it has been increasingly and

convincingly recognised by Japanese policy makers and the public that China is persistently taking coercive actions regarding its core interest issues on all fronts and that there are compelling strategic linkages between the Senkaku islands, Taiwan, the East China Sea and the South China Sea.

After experiencing the global impact of COVID-19, including on global supply chains for strategic goods such as semi-conductors, a new awareness has begun to take shape in Japan. First, people are now beginning to more fully understand the significance of maintaining stable cross-strait relations and see this stability as being challenged at the present time. Second, policy experts are now calling for concrete measures to build closer and more substantive cooperative ties between Taiwan and Japan across the board and, specifically, not only in the context of US-Japan or US-Taiwan-Japan cooperation.

In spite of a politically deep-seated reluctance to promote measures to seek security cooperation with Taiwan, a series of evident attempts by China to change status quo has triggered interest in strengthening deterrence as well as probing the limits or uncertainties of deterrence. Whether or not the coming 2+2 meeting explicitly takes up a review of the 2015 Guidelines for Japan-US Defence Cooperation in the context of Taiwan, it is an urgent and inescapable issue on the bilateral agenda. What is important will be to give priority to ensuring effective integration of whole of government planning, broader participation of all stakeholders in the policy making processes related to diplomacy and defence, and to operationalise 24-7 information sharing and coordinating across the board, both at home and in bilateral and multilateral contexts elsewhere. In order to maintain

regional stability and prepare for potential surprises, it will be vital to develop and strengthen the web of routine working relationships and close communication channels across all areas of mutual interest, not excluding security and defence.

In approaching the review of the 2018 NDPG and the 5 year defence plan, in order to build “a truly effective defence capability that does not lie on a linear extension of the past”, there remain three major challenges. First, budget allocation. As articulated in the 2018 NDPG, “thorough rationalization that does not dwell on the past” is a must, but that should not mean less than modest increases in the defence budget. It is worth noting that Japan’s defence spending for FY 2021 is just 4% higher than for FY1997, a quarter of a century earlier. The budget request for FY 2022 provides for a still modest 7% increase. The broad security review being undertaken is predicated on sufficient and sustainable funding, despite the increasingly tight competition for government resources.

Second, breaking the silos. In the past process, a “coordinated and well-balanced single draft plan” was proposed by the MOD and, in broad terms, was approved with these qualities intact. When it came to implementation, however, the integrated nature of the plan was neglected as the traditional bureaucratic silos (land, sea and air) pressed their separate claims. One possible pragmatic approach would be to ask the MOD and the expert community outside the DOD, to propose ways of looking at force structure that are responsive to new technologies, strategies and tactics and which erode the relevance of traditional divisions.

Third, gaining public understanding of and support for reviewing and revising traditional policy measures. In the LDP Presidential election



21 June 2021. Seoul, ROK. US and ROK special representatives and director general of Japan's Asian affairs bureau Funakoshi Takehiro during a meeting. Credit: NK News.

campaign, partially due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the greater reliance of online meetings, major debates were conducted virtually and it turned out to be an open, transparent and interactive process for policy making. The issues addressed included significant increases in the defence budget, how to fill the missile gap between Japan and China as well as Japan and North Korea, the question of active defence to deter these countries and further elevation of the Japan-US alliance. The task ahead will be to engineer a relative transition from policy debates over abstract frameworks and legal aspects to a focus on presenting specific policy options and concrete measures to be attained in specified timeframes and addressing the requirements of scenarios ranging from the normal to the extreme.

Japan issued its Cyber Security Strategy 2021 in September after reviewing and updating its 2018 Strategy. Reflecting the rapid changes and developments in the

international security environments and in technologies, this new strategy includes some notable changes. First, it highlighted the increasingly severe international security challenges, the new normality of cyberspace as a sphere of geopolitical competition, and named China, Russia and North Korea as presumed to be conducting cyberattacks against Japan. Second, the strategy calls for measures to counter cyber incidents and challenges to international rule-making and to develop dependable guidelines to separate cyberspace measures that seek to advance freedom and fairness from those aimed at national control of cyberspace.

Prior to the formulation of the strategy, Japan's National Security Council made its recommendations to the Cyber Security Strategy Headquarters, highlighting the following points. First, strengthen cyberspace situational awareness including measures necessary to enhance attribution capability utilising all sources of information.

Second, strengthen defence capability against cyberattacks across the board, focusing on massive collection, accumulation and exploitation of data related to cyberattacks, protection of government networks as well as critical infrastructure, and SDF capability based on the 2018 NDPG. Third, strengthen cyber deterrent capability in a seamless manner ranging from normal situations to extreme contingencies, including taking measures to disrupt cyberattacks and making public attribution by fully exercising all resources and in close cooperation with allied and like-minded countries. Four, integrate and coordinate all efforts to strengthen cybersecurity under the guidance of the National Security Council and its Secretariat, while promoting international cooperation and collaboration, and confidence building measures. Five, ensure credible cyberspace capabilities to provide reassurance from the social, commercial and individual standpoints.



For the government to fully implement these measures, it will clearly require some political courage to go beyond traditional interpretation of the Constitution, other legal and also psychologically self-imposed restraints and deep-seated sensitivities regarding government handling of personal data. To explore robust measures to tackle the complicated issues related to cyberspace, one idea would be to learn lessons from the extensive debates triggered by the national legislation package considered by the Abe Cabinet. That process was composed of expert group reports on the need to make a change, ruling-coalition party debates and discussions leading to the Cabinet Decision that included a new interpretation of the Constitution and a specific timeline for the comprehensive measures to be implemented. How the establishment of the Digital Agency in September 2021 will approach its task remains to be seen.

It is true that accumulating cooperation in such areas as climate change, global health and disarmament treaties was generally believed to provide opportunities for sharing ideas and promoting cooperation as well as building confidence and trust. Looking at what Xi Jinping has sought through 2021, the year of the 100th anniversary of the CCP, engaging with China remains a formidable challenge. The most difficult element is that China uses the issues of climate security, economic security and health security as channels that can be used to deliver coercive pressure and shape the international order in its favour.

One defining issue regarding the review of the 2013 NSS will be characterising Japan-China relations given that 2022 will mark the 50th anniversary of Japan-China diplomatic normalisation. The NSS currently states that “Japan will

strive to construct and enhance a Mutually Beneficial Relationship Based on Common Strategic Interests with China in all areas, including politics, economy, finance, security, culture and personal exchanges.” It is in both countries’ interest to increase multi-layered dialogue including on crisis management and areas of cooperation. China and Japan should make every effort to avoid “a Mutually Undermining Relationship” by exploring new common strategic interests in the changing security environment. Hopefully, we will see some policy successes so that not all of the current challenges, such as the denuclearisation of North Korea, and transparent and integrated capacity-building in the Indo-Pacific will remain valid over the coming years.

### **Nobushige Takamizawa**

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# India's Evolving Strategic Perspectives

**Dr. Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan**

India's foreign and security policy have undergone significant changes over the past year. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a big impact on the Indian economy, causing it to shrink. The reduced growth, especially relative to others, will have continuing effect on India's foreign policy and security front for some time to come. India's challenges have been exacerbated by China's belligerence on the India-Tibet border, which have altered India's security perceptions. The two crises also exposed many other vulnerabilities including the overdependence on China for strategic materials, which has pushed India and many like-minded countries to take steps to strengthen supply chain resilience. India appears to be convinced that neither trade nor any other incentives is likely to ameliorate the threat from China. In response, in addition to building its own military capabilities, India is openly seeking partners that share its concerns about China.

In the beginning of November 2021, India registered a total of over 34 million confirmed COVID-19 cases. Though India did not register any COVID-19 cases until the end of January 2020, India's population density led to the virus spreading very rapidly. In recognition of the impending crisis, the government announced a national lockdown in March, which also largely shut down the economy. There is considerable debate about the impact of the national lockdown. Though the initiative managed to stem the spread of the pandemic at least in the first phase, the near-complete shutdown that lasted more than six



12 March 2021. Prime Minister Narendra Modi takes part in the First Quad Leaders Virtual Summit with US President Joe Biden, Australian PM Scott Morrison and Japanese PM Suga. Credit: ANI.

months shattered the economy. The second phase of the pandemic, in early 2021, exposed the fragility of India's healthcare and social welfare systems. But this phase also revealed who India's genuine partners were. India received critical pandemic assistance including items like medical oxygen, oxygen cylinders and concentrators, oxygen plants, and medicines from them during these months. While China may not have been named publicly by India for the pandemic, the deep antagonism across mass opinion spoke clearly about it.

A second and possibly even more significant factor that affected India's foreign and security outlook was the Galwan confrontation with China in the summer of 2020 that resulted in twenty Indian casualties. As Ashley Tellis succinctly put it, the bilateral relations between India and China post-Galwan "can never go back to the old normal. They will reset with greater competitiveness and in ways that neither country had actually intended at the beginning of the crisis." The dominant perspective on the clash in the Indian security community was that India's China's policy was based on false assumptions and had to be corrected and that India could no longer follow ambivalent positions and strategies. Though

there have been several rounds of negotiations between India and China, there is no sign of diffusion of the crisis, further hardening Indian views on China. India is also no longer shy of calling out China for causing the current stand-off. In addition, India's firm position that "unilateral change of status quo is unacceptable" and that "full restoration and maintenance of peace and tranquillity in border areas is essential for development of our ties" also reflects how the crisis is viewed domestically.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the Galwan clash have been significant markers shaping the outlook of India's security community. But there is also growing recognition that India's capacity to respond to China across both the land border and maritime spaces simultaneously is limited, especially in the post-COVID period. This means that India has to forge and nurture important bilateral, minilateral and regional strategic partnerships that would offer India some cushion while it is building up its national security capabilities. Reflecting the harsh economic impact of the pandemic, the Indian defence budget allocation saw only a marginal hike of 1.4% in the 2020-21 budget, though the allocation for capital spending rose 18.8%. As India



“The dominant perspective on the [Galwan] clash in the Indian security community was that India’s China’s policy was based on false assumptions and had to be corrected and that India could no longer follow ambivalent positions and strategies.”

continues to beef up its defence, it has also sharpened its diplomatic and security engagements with a number of partners in the Indo-Pacific such as the United States, Japan, Australia, and France.

India-US relations in particular have become deeper over the last year, with an increased number of political consultations and security dialogues including periodic telephonic conversations between senior officials on both sides, presumably covering China and the broader Indo-Pacific developments. In comparison, the US response during the 2017 Sino-India confrontation over Doklam was rather more nuanced, possibly due to Indian sensitivities. The militaries of the two countries have also strengthened their engagements with frequent joint exercises. New Delhi’s comfort and confidence in Washington as a reliable partner has become that much greater, something reflected in the public debate too. This has also allowed the two countries to pursue a much bigger strategic agenda in the Indo-Pacific, to ensure that it does not come under Chinese dominance. India

and the US have therefore proactive strategic engagements with a number of others countries including through trilateral and other minilateral arrangements such as Quad and Quad-Plus, including New Zealand, South Korea and Vietnam. Additional arrangements such as the Quad-Plus may take a while to develop because of political and historic trouble spots such as between Japan and South Korea. The India-US defence trade and partnership has also grown enormously, reaching over \$20 billion worth of military equipment and platforms purchased from the US since 2001, making it India’s second largest arms supplier, after Russia. The two countries have also concluded multiple agreements including the four defence foundational agreements and the Industrial Security Annex (ISA) as well as the Helicopter Operations from Ships Other Than Aircraft Carriers (HOSTAC) agreements, which will make the India-US defence engagements more effective and meaningful. In overall terms as well, India’s relationship with the US will likely continue to broaden and deepen in the coming years.

India has also strengthened its other Indo-Pacific partnerships, which have become more strategic in nature in the last few years. For example, India-Japan relations have seen a transformative evolution in the last decade. Worries about China and a shared vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific, evident through their respective Act East Policy and Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategies have produced greater synergy in their approach towards the Indo-Pacific region. Japan and India also support other initiatives such as the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative and the ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific. For India, Japan has emerged as one of its most trusted partners, evident in the fact that Japan is engaged in developing India’s sensitive strategic

border areas like India’s northeast and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. That the two countries were able to conclude a civil nuclear cooperation agreement speaks a lot about Japanese confidence in the India partnership. The two sides have also instituted regular political and strategic dialogues through several different channels including 2+2 dialogue formats. In addition to service-to-service military exercises, Japan has become a permanent partner in the Malabar series of naval exercises.

India’s relationship with Australia too has gained much strength in recent years. As in other relationships, China has become a significant reason for the augmented India-Australia ties. Especially since 2020, both India and Australia have been at the receiving end of China’s bullying. In addition, European countries are also increasingly demonstrating greater interest in the Indo-Pacific strategic affairs. Several European countries have released Indo-Pacific strategies but France appears to be the most committed and invested player, given its territorial stake in the Indian Ocean. This is likely to work well with India since France is one of India’s oldest strategic partners.

A more determined Quad involving Australia, India, Japan and the US, is the other important strategic manifestation in the Indo-Pacific. Even though the original Quad (2007) initiative fell apart quickly, it is back with a clearer purpose and determination. The Quad has become a lot more substantive with two summit meetings this year, which was inconceivable even last year. In the Indian strategic community, there was some apprehensions about what the incoming Biden administration’s approach to China would be. But those suspicions have now been put to rest. Moreover, though India was considered the weakest link in the Quad, it has become more committed

after Galwan, something clearly evident in the Indian public discourse. The Quad is also making efforts to expand and bring in more countries through different formulations such as the many minilaterals wherein one or two Quad countries have partnered with one or two other non-Quad members. Such minilaterals are likely to gain greater traction and the many loose strategic coalitions that are emerging in the region are developing a shared agenda. Examples of this include the India-Australia-Indonesia, the India-Australia-France, and the India-Japan-Italy minilaterals.

Quadrilateral and other minilateral efforts have traditionally remained focused on the geography of the Indo-Pacific but there is a recognition that China needs to be confronted not just in the Indo-Pacific but elsewhere as well. For instance, China's growing influence in the Middle East through its Belt and Road and other regional initiatives are of concern, giving birth to a new Middle East Quad involving India, Israel, UAE and the US. The China factor may not be as pronounced in this grouping as yet, but there are other indirect ways of dealing with China through this

grouping. The technological prowess of Israel and the UAE's capacity to fund infrastructure and connectivity projects, is emerging as an alternative to China's BRI as the sole provider of such funds and technologies. India's traditional wariness of such exclusive groups has been replaced by excitement and enthusiasm and India will continue to be an active player in this regard.

Finally, India's relationship with one of its old partners, Russia, has become increasingly complicated. Russia is fast losing support in the Indian strategic community, though some sympathy still remains. The relationship has become trickier with Moscow's need to partner with Beijing as a means to finding strategic space in dealing with the West. While India and Russia continue to look at the relationship through their old historical ties, there is a general sense in the Indian debate that this does little good for India in contemporary circumstances. Though India continues to rely on Russia for defence equipment and there is appreciation that it gets advanced technologies such as naval nuclear reactors and S-400 air defence systems

that no one else will share, Russia selling even more advanced weapon systems to China is seen as potentially tilting the military balance further in favour of China. India's relationship with Russia is also based on a possibly false hope that it might wean Russia away from China, though there is considerable scepticism that this is possible. Moreover, India and Russia are also beginning to diverge a lot on other issues, such as Pakistan and Afghanistan. In brief, the well of support for Russia in the Indian strategic community is running rather low.

In sum, the India-China border confrontation in Galwan has been a game changer for India and how the Indian strategic community views India's options. The adversarial nature of the India-China relationship is unlikely to change given that China's military and economic power will continue to grow. Moreover, there is a clear sense in India that China is unwilling to see the rise of an India or of a normal Japan. Reluctantly but undoubtedly, both Indian policy and India's strategic community are beginning to reflect on and respond to such an assessment.

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Image tweeted by @adgpi

13 September 2021. Indian army contingent ready for Multi Nation Exercise named 'ZAPAD 2021' to be held in Russia's Nizhny. Credit: @adgpi / twitter.



## Russian Views on Developments in Regional Security

**Vasily Kashin**

The regional security situation in Asia is seen in Russia as deteriorating sharply with a real possibility of a large-scale military conflict in the next five to ten years. An important new trend shaping the regional security environment has been the growing involvement of non-regional players (European NATO members) in the great power rivalry in the region.

As far as security planning is concerned, Asia remains a region of secondary importance for Russia compared to Eastern Europe where Ukraine remains the primary concern for Russian foreign policy. Yet Russian involvement in the Asian region is increasing and Russia's alignment with China in the military field has strengthened.

Russian policy planners have tried to maintain a more balanced and diversified policy in Asia, but these efforts appeared to suffer a setback with the deterioration of the Russian-Japanese ties after Shinzo Abe's resignation.

An emerging consideration in the regional security environment with deep strategic consequences is the changing dynamics in the nuclear field. China appears to be on track to become the third nuclear superpower, most likely by mid 2030s. That will trigger changes in the security strategies of all independent players in the region and all major economic and military powers globally.

There appears to be growing connectivity between the security

dynamics in the Asia-Pacific with the situation in the Middle East and Europe. While China is obviously building a global military force capable of large-scale force projection around the world, the US is trying to reduce its security commitments in the other regions – and failing to do so, especially because of the ongoing confrontation with Russia and, to lesser extent, because of its problematic relations with Iran.

Russia is poised to increase its defence cooperation with China as was demonstrated by the events of 2021, including the first ever joint Russian-Chinese naval patrol. Still both sides are carefully protecting the ambiguity about the nature of their security relationship and deny any plans or intentions to sign an alliance



14 July 2021. Dushanbe, Tajikistan. Foreign ministers and officials of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) attend a meeting. Credit: Russian Foreign Ministry.



17 September 2021. Dushanbe, Tajikistan. 21st Meeting of the Council of Heads of State of the SCO. Credit: Chanakya Forum.

treaty. This approach is likely to be maintained by both Moscow and Beijing, at least until there is a major security crisis in the region.

Russia takes careful note of the growing instability of the strategic situation in Asia. The major events and crises in that region are now routinely addressed in statements by Russia’s leading political figures. Yet the comments by the Russian side, although generally supportive of China, remain cautious. While talking to the NBC in June 2021, Russian President Vladimir Putin refused to discuss the potential scenario of China attempting to reunify with Taiwan by force, stating that such scenario was highly hypothetical since there was no proof that China intended to solve the Taiwan issue by force. Later, speaking at an energy forum in October 2021 Putin said that China, in his opinion, was trying to solve the Taiwan issue by peaceful means and generally avoids using force.

He also mentioned the South China Sea issue, noting that it should be solved peacefully by the regional countries through a series of bilateral consultations. Addressing Asian security matters in official statements while not meeting Asian politicians

or visiting the countries of the region is extremely unusual when seen against the practices of Russia’s top leadership in the past. Pacific security issues are growing in prominence but Russia remains careful in its statements.

Taiwan is seen as a key element in the global Sino-US rivalry and the official Russian position is that of full support for China’s territorial integrity, including Taiwan, and general support ‘in principle’ for Chinese policies regarding Taiwan. What is unclear at this point, is the true depth of such support in the event it is tested by a security crisis concerning the island.

The South China Sea issue is more problematic for Russia since Russia is trying to avoid having to choose between its two key partners in the Asia Pacific – China and Vietnam. So far Russia has been successful on this front, continuing robust security cooperation with both countries, and will endeavour to sustain this posture into the future.

Russia is continuing its involvement in the North Korean nuclear issue although it has limited means to influence Pyongyang’s political decisions: Russia-DPRK trade, for example, stood at a negligible \$42.7

million in 2020. While Russian policy on this issue remains to be coordinated with that of China, Russia has maintained close consultations on the issue with South Korea in particular but also with the US and Japan.

In spite of the fact that the Asian security agenda has risen in prominence sharply since 2017, for Russia itself this agenda remains secondary to events in Eastern Europe. During 2021 Eastern Europe was the scene of two major security crises centred around Ukraine (spring and autumn 2021) which affected Russian security interests in a direct way.

While occasionally mentioning Asian security affairs in their statements, Russian politicians pay much more attention to developments in Europe, especially to the growing NATO military presence in Ukraine. Asian developments tend to attract attention if they have global significance or significant implications for US policies and force posture in Europe and the Middle East.

That said, a major change in Russian linkages with Asia has been the apparent cooling of Russian-Japanese relations. A contributing factor, was amendments to the Russian Constitution adopted in 2020 that made any territorial concessions apart from border demarcation and delimitation illegal. This made any prospect for the resolution of the Russian-Japanese territorial issue even more problematic although both sides maintain that they will continue the negotiations on a peace treaty.

It is now increasingly evident that the period of the Russian-Japanese rapprochement associated with the policies of Japan’s Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, ended with his retirement in August 2020. The relationship was likely further affected by the growing Russian-



Chinese security cooperation and the strengthening of the Japan-US security alliance. The latter was named by the Russian foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, as a key irritant for Russia. These setbacks to bilateral relations have affected the security relationship. Japan, for the first time, recently mentioned Russia as a threat in its cybersecurity strategy, along with China and North Korea.

Although Russia maintains a significant military presence in the South Kuril Islands claimed by Japan (Russia does not recognise the existence of the territorial dispute), the direct security implications of this new norm in Russian-Japanese relations will probably be insignificant. At the same time, however, this is a major setback for Russian attempts to have more diversified economic and political cooperation in Asia as well as for Japanese attempts to build up trust and cooperation with Russia in the hope that it would limit Russian-Chinese security cooperation. Since the underlying reasons for the previous attempts to establish a closer Russian-Japanese partnership will continue to exist, the two countries can renew attempts to revitalise cooperation in the future when circumstances look more favourable.

Russia has considerably boosted defence cooperation with China. In 2021, apart from most of the other regular activities established in previous years (yearly joint naval exercises; joint strategic level exercise; SCO-guided peace mission exercise; military competitions in the Army Games framework etc.) the two sides undertook a completely new activity – a joint naval patrol with a combined Russian-Chinese naval task force going around Japan.

The desire to deepen bilateral defence cooperation was expressed in the

joint declaration on the occasion of the extension of the 2001 Treaty of Good-Neighborliness, Friendship and Cooperation. In the statement, the two sides said that they intended to further deepen cooperation between the armed forces, including through the growing number of joint exercises and broader contacts between the regional commands and the commands of the two country's armed forces branches and services.

The two sides were known to be working on a new ambitious defence cooperation agreement since 2019. This work, which naturally involves a lot of consultations between the experts, appears to have stalled during the COVID period since no new information about the agreement has appeared.

Defence industrial ties appear to continue at a relatively stable level, with a least one major contract for some 120 helicopters being implemented along with other deals. In general, the Russian-Chinese arms trade became more secretive because of the introduction of CAATSA (a 2017 US law imposing sanctions on Russia, along with Iran and North Korea).

While extending their defence ties, both sides insist that they have no plans to create a military alliance. However, Article 9 of the Russian-Chinese Treaty of 2001 already provides a mechanism of urgent consultations in case of threats of aggression against Russia or China and such consultations are supposed to be dedicated to the removal of the threat.

The two sides appear to prefer strategic ambiguity concerning the nature of their security relationship and the possibility of joint actions in case of a security crisis in the region. This appears to be a relatively cheap and effective cost imposition strategy aimed at complicating US military

“On the other hand, China will significantly increase its capabilities to project power all around the world and protect its interests in the key areas such as the South China Sea. The global and regional consequences of this change are likely to be massive and are just starting to be realised”

planning and making their deterrence strategy more expensive.

Russia pays close attention to the development of Chinese military capabilities especially in the nuclear arena. The statements by Russia's leadership suggest that Russia looks favourably on the attempts by China to bring its military power into balance or alignment with its economic power. That includes Chinese nuclear capabilities. In October 2020, President Putin stated that there was no reason for China to 'freeze' its nuclear capabilities and that developing its nuclear forces was China's sovereign right.

Russia apparently does not see the growing Chinese nuclear forces as a direct threat, at least for the foreseeable future. There is, however, an understanding that China's rise will change the foundations of strategic stability and may finally destroy what is left of the arms control regime that emerged from the

Cold War. The existing model for a nuclear arms control and strategic stability dialogue is strictly bilateral and based on the precondition that the capabilities of all other players are insignificant when compared to the nuclear forces of the two superpowers.


The emergence of China as the third nuclear superpower together with the obvious asymmetry in the Russia-

Chinese-American military-political triangle will likely make any kind of agreement on quantitative limitations to the nuclear forces exceedingly difficult, if not absolutely impossible. None of the three powers would agree to discriminatory limitations to its nuclear forces.

Yet, taking into account close military cooperation (although not a classical alliance) between Russia and China

and their common animosity to the US, it is likely that the US would summarise their capabilities for the purposes of the nuclear planning and try to compete with Moscow and Beijing taken together.

That will result in the death of the current Russian-US arms control treaty (the new START) probably no later than the early 2030s (the best we can hope for is one extension).



18 October 2021. Sea of Japan. A group of naval vessels from China and Russia sails during joint military drills. Credit: Russian Defence Ministry / Reuters.



This prospect is not causing any enthusiasm in Moscow but is seen as inevitable. Xi Jinping's agreement to look into the possibility of strategic stability talks, which was mentioned by the US side after the Xi-Biden video summit in November 2021, does not mean that the traditional Chinese position on arms control has changed and that they are ready for substantive talks on possible future agreements.

Furthermore, deterrence of the new nuclear superpower will likely be extremely costly because of the need to deploy tripwire forces on many theatres and will affect the US military posture all around the world. On the other hand, China will significantly increase its capabilities to project power all around the world and protect its interests in the key areas such as the South China Sea. The global and regional consequences

of this change are likely to be massive and are just starting to be realised. These developments are especially interesting for Russian observers since they are starting to resemble the Cold War era in Europe.

### **Vasily Kashin**

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# The EU's Presence and Strategy in the Indo-Pacific

**Daniel Fiott**

Throughout 2021, it was clear to all external actors that the EU was set to produce a strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. After initial Council of the EU Conclusions on 19 April 2021 that set out the main parameters for EU engagement, the European Commission and High Representative set about refining how the EU would boost its presence in the Indo-Pacific region. This was by no means a simple task as only France, Germany and the Netherlands had articulated national positions or strategies on the Indo-Pacific. Indeed, it was not clear how far other EU Member States would buy-in to the process. In this respect, the EU strategy had to stimulate a genuinely EU-wide common interest in the Indo-Pacific and avoid 'free-riding' on the backs of those European states with an existing presence in the region.

On 16 September 2021, the strategy was finally delivered and the Union made clear that it would focus on seven priority areas for the region including: sustainable and inclusive prosperity, green transition, ocean governance, digital governance and partnerships, connectivity, security and defence and human security. It is worth studying these priorities because they clearly do not delimit the Union's approach to naval strategy or grand designs for the development of an EU flotilla. In this sense, the EU's approach to the Indo-Pacific is - in EU parlance - 'integrated' and so it will necessarily focus on trade and investment, climate change, maritime security and the deterioration of human rights and democracy given the rise of authoritarian regimes in the region.



16 September 2021. Josep Borrell discusses the EU's new Indo-Pacific strategy.  
Credit: EU / Claudio Centonze.

There are two over-arching issues in the strategy that are noteworthy. First, the Union recognises that the Indo-Pacific is a vast region enclosed within the shores of the east coast of Africa and the Pacific Island States. Such a description shows that the EU does not use its strategy to define what the Indo-Pacific is and it skates over the fact that it has bought into the geographical framing of the region made popular by the Trump administration. In essence, the EU recognises that the Indo-Pacific is a huge region that includes continental-sized and micro-island states, coastal states, land-locked states and vast tracts of ocean.

Second, the Union calls its approach principled and long-term, even if it does not define what 'long-term' means in practice. In fact, close reading of the strategy gives one the impression that the strategy is open-ended without defined review periods for the actions it seeks to deliver. While this can be read as a move to ensure flexibility, the Union's staying power in the region will be one of the major benchmarks through which its approach will be measured. The strategy makes clear that the EU is not seeking confrontation, but the majority of states in the region know

that the Indo-Pacific is increasingly relevant because of the rise of China. Thus, any discussion of what 'long-term' means is in practice a reflection of how far China will continue to rise and be seen as much as a cause of concern in the Indo-Pacific as an essential economic partner.

Beyond these two broad issues, however, the EU has built up its strategy around practical projects and deliverables. For example, the Union wants to deepen its partnership agreements with Malaysia, Thailand and the Maldives. The EU also wants to complete trade negotiations with Australia, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, New Zealand, the Philippines and Thailand. Additionally, the Union seeks to develop digital and connectivity partnerships with India and Japan, as well as to enhance research and innovation cooperation with Australia, Japan, New Zealand, Republic of Korea and Singapore.

Security and defence is another area of focus for the Union. Here, attention is paid to counter-terrorism and cybersecurity, as well as maritime security and countering hybrid threats. The EU can legitimately claim to have added-value in these areas, not least because it is already working with partners on these areas. It is also



directly facing these very threats closer to home too. In the area of maritime security the EU has intensified its naval exercises with key partners such as Djibouti, India, Japan, Oman, Tanzania and others. At least 12 naval exercises have been held since June 2016, the month in which the EU Global Strategy was published.

This focus on security and defence in many ways builds on the national endeavours of certain EU Member States. In early April 2019, the French frigate Vendemiaire passed through the Taiwan Strait. Germany's Bayern frigate has been on tour to the region for a six-month period, even though it was notably denied a port-call visit to Shanghai in mid-September (despite diplomatic efforts by Berlin, such as avoiding sailing through the Taiwan Strait). One should expect these efforts to continue and perhaps intensify following the EU strategy.

Visible projects and presence are, of course, a way to flag the EU's willingness to cooperate with Indo-Pacific partners, but it also serves to further highlight the importance of the region for those EU Member States who may still be sceptical. Yet, despite such steps, there are a number of challenges that will affect the Union's ability to be a major player in the Indo-Pacific. Two are directly linked to the strategy itself. First, the EU will need to do better at combining its strategic analysis of climate change and the protection of the environment with maritime security and hybrid threats. The present strategy treats these security issues as separate domains whereas in reality there is evidence to show that climate change and resources can be a source of hybrid threats (hybrid threats is mentioned only once in the strategy in relation to cyber).

Second, the EU places its flag in the need for inclusive and effective multilateralism with the region. This

is easier said than done given that the region is home to exclusive forms of cooperation such as the Quad, AUKUS, ASEAN and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. It is questionable whether the region will yield to an 'inclusive' form of multilateralism given that alliances, rivalries and economic relationships are dynamic and far more transactional than what the EU is used to within its own ranks. In this respect, the mantra of inclusivity will need to be adjusted according to the Union's interests.

Beyond the strategy, however, there are two additional major challenges facing the EU in its approach to the Indo-Pacific. The first obvious concern is how the EU will balance security interests in the Indo-Pacific with security pressures closer to home. The Indo-Pacific is the location of a sizeable amount of the EU's economic interests and it is the maritime conduit that links Europe to its trading partners and markets in the region. Additionally, the EU is a de facto member of the Indo-Pacific region because of the 1.5 million French citizens that live there. Yet, Europe also has to deal with a belligerent Russia and geopolitical competition is being played out across an arc of instability that surrounds the Union. Added to this are the pressing concerns of terrorism, state failure, under-development and climate change in places such as the Horn of Africa, the Sahel and broader Middle East and North Africa.

The reality is, of course, that an "either-or" framing cannot really work for the EU and so the challenge is how best to balance its interests in both theatres. Nevertheless, how successful the EU is at this strategy is dependent on capabilities. EU Member States are not set to exponentially increase their defence budgets, and, to the extent that they are, most will not have the Indo-Pacific very high on their list. Yet, the EU is in a bind either way. Some states

are concerned about the US' drift to the Indo-Pacific because it leaves Washington with less bandwidth for Europe's territorial security. Some states believe this shows the need for EU and NATO members to invest more in Europe and not the Indo-Pacific. The flip side to this assumption however is that focusing on European security would make the EU almost entirely dependent on the US in the Indo-Pacific. Such a level of dependence is not really feasible given the size of the Union's economic power, and the fact that Brussels and Washington do not share the exact same approach to China or to the region as a whole.

This leads to the second major challenge for the EU; namely, how far does the US and other players want the EU to go in playing a role in the Indo-Pacific? Indeed, one of the readings from the brutally handled 'AUKUS affair' is the understanding that Washington, Canberra and London want the EU to play a secondary role in the region. In this regard, the timing for the AUKUS submarine deal - with the announcement of the deal coming only a day before the EU launched its Indo-Pacific strategy - was clearly not coincidental. However one frames Australia's decision to opt for an - as yet - undetermined nuclear-powered submarine programme, Washington was able to use the deal to convey the message that the Indo-Pacific is principally a theatre for containing China.

Judging by the reactions from some partners in the Indo-Pacific, the heavy blow inflicted on France was regarded with concern because there was a fear that the EU would simply abandon the region. Countries such as Japan and India were quick to call on the Union to retain its ambitions to play a more prominent role in the region, if anything because the prospects of being left alone to deal with the US-China rivalry is hardly appealing. In this respect, the reaction of partners in

the Indo-Pacific were more forthcoming than from some fellow EU Member States. Although the Presidents of the European Commission and European Council condemned the AUKUS deal, a number of EU Member States (with, let us not forget, defence industrial interests of their own) were quick to paint the affair as simply a defence deal gone bad for the French.

Fortunately, recent steps by France and the US to diffuse the situation have already resulted in language calling on the EU to continue to engage in the Indo-Pacific. The Union's Indo-Pacific Strategy has survived to become the guiding document that should help the EU frame its engagement with the region. However, deeds speak louder than words. This implies that even if the US wants to frame its engagement in the Indo-Pacific in largely military terms, it should not seek to obstruct the Union's broader approach based on economic and regulatory engagement. It also means that if EU Member

States want to continue to generate economic wealth they cannot overlook the Indo-Pacific.

From ensuring the security of supply chains to protecting EU citizens in the region, the Union has every reason to step up its role in the Indo-Pacific. Accordingly, it will need to move with speed and vigour to agree and implement the 'Global Gateway' connectivity strategy that is due in 2022 and intended to support sustainable EU investment in transport and digital infrastructures in the region. If the Union manages to connect these investments with new supply chains and economic partnerships in the region, then it can promote its own norms and commercial interests. These economic efforts should be underwritten by maritime capacity building efforts and technology partnerships.

Finally, there can be no meaningful or long-term EU presence in the

Indo-Pacific without financial investments. To be sure, the EU may not be able to compete with China's level of investment on its Belt and Road Initiative or match up to China or the US in terms of naval power. This should not, however, be read as an excuse not to invest in its own naval and maritime surveillance capacities. Accordingly, the EU must be better prepared to defend its own interests in the Indo-Pacific by boosting its capabilities and ensuring interoperability with partners in the region. This is a core part of the Union's ambition to defend the rules-based multilateral order, build a strong network of partners and contribute to security in the Indo-Pacific.

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“It is questionable whether the [Indo Pacific] region will yield to an ‘inclusive’ form of multilateralism given that alliances, rivalries and economic relationships are dynamic and far more transactional than what the EU is used to within its own ranks.”



The new UK aircraft carrier, *Queen Elizabeth*, seen through the cockpit of a Merlin helicopter. Credit: LPhot Daniel Shepherd / MoD / Crown.



## Canada's Strategic Approach to Asia: A House Divided

Jeffrey Reeves



12 October 2021. Port of Manila, Philippines. Canada's Ambassador to the Philippines Peter MacArthur welcomes Commanding Officer of the HMCS *Winnipeg*, to Manila.  
Credit: Canadian Embassy in Manila.

Across Canada's security sector, one finds broad agreement on the need for a nationally coordinated approach to the Asian region. Short of this general consensus, however, one finds significant incongruity among Canadian policymakers and strategic planners as to the country's best strategic approach. Neither are the differences in perspectives insignificant, but rather include such fundamental strategic issues as geographic scope, great power dynamics, and global governance. For the sake of analytical clarity, it is possible to classify Canadian discourse on Asia into two schools: the Indo-Pacificists versus the Asia-Pacificists. Within these two analytical 'camps', one finds almost geometrically opposed visions of Asia's strategic, operational, and tactical environment and an understanding of Canada's place within it.

Canada's 'Indo-Pacificists', for instance, argue the country's national interests in Asia are best served through alignment with other democratic 'likeminded states', through cooperation in institutions in

which Canada plays a significant role, such as NATO and the G7, through potential accession to the Quad and/or Quad-Plus, and through close coordination with the United States and its regional allies, particularly Australia and Japan. The Indo-Pacificists argue for a geographic widening of the Asia-Pacific to the 'Indo-Pacific' not on the grounds that the regional expansion fits Canada's material and strategic interests, but rather because in doing so Canada becomes more aligned with other 'Indo-Pacific' states and better positioned to cooperate with these states in Asia.

Canada's strategic end state in this 'Indo-Pacific' region is the preservation of Asia's 'rules-based order' (RBO), or international liberalism. Inherent in this Canadian view of regional development is the belief that Asia's 'order' is synonymous with Western values around 'freedom' and 'openness', both concepts which the Indo-Pacificists use as shorthand for democratic governance, individual freedom, maritime openness, and economic liberalism. The Indo-Pacificists argue, in turn, that Asia's

RBO is under strain from Chinese revisionism and in need of support from outsider powers including Australia, Europe, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

To affect its strategic alignment with its 'likeminded partners', the Indo-Pacificists argue for Canadian adoption of a 'free and open Indo-Pacific' (FOIP) design; one firmly focused on Southeast Asia as its strategic centre of gravity. While ostensibly aware of the FOIP's strategic shortcomings, the Indo-Pacificists argue Canada can mitigate any reputational costs it might endure

“...the Indo-Pacificists argue for Canadian adoption of a ‘free and open Indo-Pacific’ (FOIP) design; one firmly focused on Southeast Asia as its strategic centre of gravity... While agreeing that China’s increased regional influence is reshaping the Asian order, the Asia-Pacificists see this is a natural outcome of the country’s development, particularly as China has cemented its status as the region’s economic core.”

through targeted policy making, specifically engaging with Western states on the FOIP where doing so advances Canadian national interests and disengaging with the FOIP where it carries reputational costs.

Alternatively, a minority of Canadian analysts argue for an Asia-Pacific approach, noting Canada's interests are better served in maintaining a geographic and strategic focus on the region. Central to this perspective is the understanding that regionalisation within the Asia-Pacific is leading to consolidated state and institutional relations across Northeast and Southeast Asia and that Canada's most effective means of ensuring its national interests in the region—defined in terms of economic growth, national security, and state prestige—is direct engagement with these states and within these institutions.

More specifically, Canada's 'Asia-Pacificists' advocate for a networked approach to Canada's state and institutional relations. Inherent in this approach is tactical-level engagement with states, institutions, and non-state actors within the Asia-Pacific on an issue-by-issue basis. By prioritising actionable, tactical-level issue-area cooperation, Canada can build a strategic presence in the Asia-Pacific from the bottom up. The Asia-Pacificists argue an approach of this type demonstrates Canada's strategic commitment to the region, enables Canada to learn from regional narratives, and positions Canada as a network node within the region. Long-term, the Asia-Pacificists believe Canada's national interests are best served through omnidirectional diplomacy and strategic integration in the Asia-Pacific.

A corollary to this understanding of the Asia-Pacific is the belief that the 'Indo-Pacific' is an imagined region that states like Australia, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States use to justify Western militarism and intervention in the Asian region, exclusively to counter

China's 'rise'. That the 'Indo-Pacific's' two primary institutions—the Quad and AUKUS—are security constructs and as the principal 'Indo-Pacific' proponent states are US alliance partners (and former colonial states) reinforces this perception among the Asia-Pacificists.

Informing these nearly polar opposite visions of Canada's preferred approach to Asia are two competing worldviews, primarily with respect to the Western world's global role and China's place within international order.

The Indo-Pacificists, for instance, see Canada's role as a Western state as an inherent strategic advantage and encourage Ottawa to work directly with Western states and within Western institutions in its approach to the Asian region. Specifically, the Indo-Pacificists argue Western state alignment is the most direct means for Canada to implement a values-based approach to Asia; one aligned with Western ideals around global governance, liberal economics, and human rights, among other issues. Rather than prioritise direct regional diplomacy, the Indo-Pacificists argue Canada should leverage its status as a G7 country, as a member of NATO, and as a democratic middle power to maximise its ability to direct change in Asia.

Underlying this logic is the assumption that Western leadership remains an important aspect of world order, including in the Asia-Pacific (or 'Indo-Pacific'), and that Canada's involvement in a coterie of Western democracies provides it with strategic guiderails and serves as a force multiplier for its engagement in Asia. Somewhat ironically, this assumption leads the Indo-Pacificists to look to Canberra, Washington, and Brussels for policy direction toward Asia, up to and including their adoption of an 'Indo-Pacific' geographic reference area.

Aside from this focus on Western state alignment, the Indo-Pacificists are also vocal proponents of Canada-Japan bilateral relations, primarily because alignment with Tokyo's FOIP concept

provides Canadian policymakers and analysts clear evidence of regional demand for an 'Indo-Pacific' model of engagement. Indeed, one sees the clearest signs that Canadian senior leadership is moving toward an 'Indo-Pacific' approach to Asia in official statements involving Canada-Japan relations, most recently in Prime Minister Trudeau's congratulatory statement to Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida where he called for Canada-Japan strategic cooperation to ensure a 'free and open Indo-Pacific region'.

Just as important as the idea of Western leadership is to the Indo-Pacificists is the belief that China has emerged as a strategic challenge to Canada in the Asian region. Primarily driven by Beijing's detention of Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor, the belief the Communist Party of China (CPC) is engaged in genocide in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), and the CPC's imposition of a national security law in Hong Kong, Canadian policymakers (and, indeed, the Canadian public) now see China in line with North Korea, as a rogue state within Asia threatening regional peace and stability. As Canada lacks the material means to challenge China directly, the Indo-Pacificists argue for joint engagement with other Western 'likeminded states'.

The Asia-Pacificists, needless to say, see global dynamics and the Asian region in a far different strategic light. Rather than advocate for Western leadership in Asia, for instance, the Asia-Pacificists call for Canadian identification of and participation with regional centres of power, be it states, institutions, nodes, or relationships. While Canada can and should maintain its foreign policy values and its identity as a progressive democracy, the Asia-Pacificists argue it can best achieve its national interests through regional engagement and diplomacy, particularly if its diplomats do so with clear understanding of regional narratives, priorities, and assumptions. What Canada might lose from



distancing itself from Western state coalitions such as the Quad, it can gain through omnidirectional and integrated relations in Asia, particularly when considered in medium-to long-terms.

From this perspective, the Asia-Pacificists caution against overreliance on Japan as a regional partner, arguing that Tokyo's view of the region is unique to its status as a Western-aligned security actor and as the key node in the US alliance system in Asia. The idea that Japan's perspectives are representative of regional viewpoints, the Asia-Pacificists argue, is incorrect as it fails to take the country's distinct and often controversial regional identity into any account. Within Northeast Asia, for example, Japan remains a contentious state actor; a status observable in Prime Minister Kishida's recent offering to the Yasukuni Shrine and the outrage it caused throughout Northeast Asia as a result.

Similarly, the Asia-Pacificists argue against the tendency in Canada to look to Australia as a model of how an outside power can engage effectively in Asia. Indeed, the Asia-Pacificists point to the Morrison administration's provocative approach to China, its inability or unwillingness to prevent anti-Chinese sentiment from creeping into Australian society, its climate change denialism, its militaristic approach to Asian affairs, and its overt alignment with the United States as

specific examples of the downsides of 'Indo-Pacific' alignment.

Lastly, the Asia-Pacificists view China's regional and global role far differently from their 'Indo-Pacific' counterparts. While agreeing that China's increased regional influence is reshaping the Asian order, the Asia-Pacificists see this is a natural outcome of the country's development, particularly as China has cemented its status as the region's economic core. Rather than seek to prevent or manage China's 'rise' through 'Indo-Pacific' multilateralism, the Asia-Pacificists advocate targeted, pragmatic engagement with Beijing in line with Canada's own national interests.

At present, the Indo-Pacificists enjoy pride of place in Canada's national debate. Prime Minister Trudeau, as detailed above, has adopted the 'Indo-Pacific' nomenclature, particularly with respect to Canada's relations with Japan. More specifically, Trudeau's reference to the 'free and open Indo-Pacific' suggests his administration is moving closer to a Australian-US-Japanese vision rather than a European view of the concept, as European states now studiously avoid referencing 'free' and 'open' in their 'Indo-Pacific' statements, preferring, instead, to advocate for EU-'Indo-Pacific' relations predicated on 'cooperation' and 'consultation'. Whether knowingly or not, Prime Minister Trudeau's use of the 'Indo-

Pacific' aligns Canada with the concept's most militaristic, anti-Chinese elements.

If the Prime Minister's choice of language indicates the future direction of Canada's approach to Asia, it does not yet represent formal policy. As of the time of writing, Global Affairs Canada has not published a comprehensive 'Indo-Pacific' strategy, although one has reportedly been a long time coming. At least part of the delay in strategic development comes from turnover in the Trudeau cabinet, particularly with respect to the Minister of Foreign Affairs. Whereas former Minister Marc Garneau was reportedly working to announce an 'Indo-Pacific' strategy for Canada in late 2021, his replacement, Minister Mélanie Joly is now expected to start the 'Indo-Pacific' strategic review from scratch.

For Asia-Pacificists, the Trudeau government's delay in announcing a formal 'Indo-Pacific' strategy is cause for optimism that Canadian policymakers will ultimately reject the concept as its negative aspects become clearer. Asia-Pacificists hope, for instance, that regional opposition to the AUKUS and what they perceive as Australia's growing isolation and strategic dependency on the US in the Asia-Pacific will give Canadian policymakers pause, at least with respect to alignment with the 'free and open Indo-Pacific' concept. In this respect, the Asia-Pacificists believe the delay in Canada's formal 'Indo-Pacific' strategy plays to their advantage, particularly if such delay stretches to years rather than months. Should Canada still find itself without a formal policy toward Asia in 2024 and the United States enters another period of instability around the next presidential election, Ottawa might reconsider the value of alignment with Washington in the 'Indo-Pacific' and opt for a more balanced Asia-Pacific strategy instead.

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11 August 2021. Canadian Ambassador Dominic Barton delivers a statement about Canadian businessman Michael Spavor sentenced to 11 years in China. Credit: AFP.

## The Regional Security Outlook: A View from the Republic of Korea

### Dr. Kuyoun Chung

With a few months left before South Korean President Moon Jae-in's term ends in May 2022, his government is relentlessly attempting to revitalise the now-stalemate denuclearisation dialogue with North Korea. In particular, President Moon is continuing to call for an end-of-war declaration as a way of building trust between North Korea and the United States, starting a denuclearisation dialogue, and eventually developing a peace regime on the Korean peninsula. Critics fear such a declaration might undermine the ROK-US alliance and thwart the international sanctions that penalise the North's nuclear weapon development program. However, both the US and North Korea show no interest in this declaration anyway as they disagree over the terms of starting a dialogue to begin with. The US will consent to neither economic sanction relief for North Korea nor any suspension of ROK-US joint military exercises, which the North demands as a precondition for discussing the declaration. Moreover, as long as the US perceives North Korea as a deterrable threat, it will focus more on its near-peer competitor – China.

Of course, the Biden administration completed its North Korea policy review in May 2021, ahead of its Indo-Pacific Strategy, and announced that it would take “a calibrated and practical approach” to accomplish “complete, verifiable, and irreversible abandonment” of North Korea's nuclear arsenal. “Abandonment,” which is a different term from that used by the Trump administration, does not seem to indicate Washington's diminished commitment to denuclearisation. Some even explain that the early review of North Korean policy and Washington's subsequent announcement that it was willing to engage North Korea diplomatically indicated that the US prioritised the North Korea issue over



17 March 2021. Seoul, ROK. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken meets Foreign Minister of the Republic of Korea Chung Eui-yong. Photo: US Department of State / Ron Przysucha.

other issues on its agenda. However, it would be more accurate to conclude that this early review was intended to anchor South Korea in its forthcoming Indo-Pacific strategy to counter China and restore the US alliance system in the region. In the eyes of the US, South Korea has not only hedged the US-China strategic competition but has also taken a more accommodating approach toward China to sustain momentum for dialogue with North Korea, which made it appear to be the weakest link in the US alliance network. Hence, in exchange for maintaining its diplomatic engagement toward the North that the Donald Trump-Kim Jong-un summitry initiated, the US would proactively strengthen its ties with the South.

Unfortunately, so long as the US simply deters and contains North Korea's missile and nuclear capabilities, the North is likely to redirect its provocation toward its closer targets—South Korea and Japan—until the US no longer overlooks the North's missile and nuclear threat. A series of recent

missile tests, including a submarine-launched ballistic missile, a nuclear-capable cruise missile, and a so-called hypersonic missile, and reopening its nuclear reactor in Yongbyon, can be understood in this context. Furthermore, as demonstrated by Kim Jong-un's recent speech to the 14th Supreme People's Assembly in North Korea in September 2021, North Korea is attempting to increase its negotiating leverage vis-à-vis the US by tactically aligning with China as the US-China competition escalates. These developments also suggest that perceptions of threat from North Korea in the US and South Korea have begun to diverge, something that needs to be addressed consistently to minimise the risk of miscalculation by the North.

Meanwhile, as North Korea remains a key foreign policy focus for South Korea's progressive government, President Moon Jae-in is likely to keep pursuing the peace process, despite the fact that it has yet to produce any tangible achievement. It is worrisome that such a persistent bid may decrease Seoul's importance to



“In the eyes of the US, South Korea has not only hedged the US–China strategic competition but has also taken a more accommodating approach toward China to sustain momentum for dialogue with North Korea, which made it appear to be the weakest link in the US alliance network.”

Washington. When addressing Korean peninsula matters, South Korea tends to work with the US primarily on a bilateral basis. At the present time, this means bypassing an emerging set of regional processes intended to address broader international issues. As exemplified by the emergence of the Quad, Quad Plus, D-10, Five Eyes, and AUKUS, the US is building a rule-based regional architecture with layers of mission-driven coalitions to restructure—not simply to recover—the liberal international order. To that end, the US is seeking to mobilise like-minded democracies to balance against China and restore its global leadership by pooling hard power and securing legitimacy. Meanwhile, Seoul prioritises denuclearisation of North Korea and would prefer an inclusive regional order that does not exclude any state, including China, which is the main benefactor of North Korea. Accordingly, Seoul is likely to be isolated from the process of developing this newer regional framework and the building of norms, institutions, and a

rules-based order associated with it. This consequence, however, will not overcome South Korea’s reluctance to lessen the importance it attaches to pursuing the peace process with North Korea given the pace of great-power competition between the US and China.

Nonetheless, 2021 has been the year in which the two allies have overcome tensions created by former President Trump’s transactional approach to its alliance and have restored their relationship. First, South Korea and the US reached a Special Measures Agreement (SMA) in March 2021, which had been stalled due to President Trump’s unilateral demand for South Korea to increase its contribution toward stationing US troops on the peninsula by up to five times the cost agreed in 2019. Second, both countries, despite South Korea’s established preference for a bilateral mode of cooperation, agreed to broaden the scope of cooperation beyond the Korean Peninsula, synergising South Korea’s New Southern Policy and the US’s Indo–Pacific Strategy. In fact, at the ROK–US Summit in May 2021, the two countries also expanded their partnership to address vaccine provision, climate change, supply chain resilience, and technology innovation in their attempt to provide public goods to the region amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, they extended their cooperation into cybersecurity and space policy.

The US also terminated the missile guidelines that restricted South Korea’s development of ballistic missiles capable of reaching targets beyond the Korean Peninsula. Lifting these restrictions obviously strengthens South Korea’s capacity to deter North Korea’s provocations, but it also opens the door for strengthening South Korea’s ability to achieve dominance denial against China’s power projection in Northeast Asia. Meanwhile, the prospect of OPCON (operational control authority in wartime) transfer from United States Forces Korea to the ROK armed forces remains uncertain. It

will be necessary to first complete the three-stage assessment of the merits of this important step, which has itself been postponed by the scaled-back joint military exercise and the ongoing pandemic that diminished South Korea’s military readiness. It should be emphasised that years of scaled-back combined exercises between South Korea and the US neither generated a window of opportunity to start a dialogue with the North nor advanced the security interests of the two allies, if the persistence of military provocations by North Korea is any guide. In the post-COVID-19 environment, the two allies’ restraint on the scale and character of their joint exercises is likely to be normalised if the North’s provocations continue.

It should also be noted that during the May 2021 summit, the leaders of South Korea and the US emphasised “the importance of preserving the peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait” amid the heightened regional tension over Taiwan. While both allies seem to acknowledge that South Korea’s commitment on the Taiwan issue might remain at the level of diplomatic support for the moment, experts in South Korea are concerned more broadly about how the US will posture its capabilities in the Indo–Pacific region under its evolving operational concept—multi-domain operations (MDO)—to deter a near-peer competitor, China, in all domains. Ultimately, this new concept is expected to affect the role and size of the US Forces Korea as well. While army-oriented US Forces Korea, which mainly maintains the stability of the Korean Peninsula, is less likely to contribute to crisis management in the Taiwan Strait in the short term, the strategic location of US Forces Korea could be regarded as instrumental in offsetting Chinese A2/AD capability in Northeast Asia. Grey-zone provocations are taken very seriously indeed among experts in South Korea, as is the frequency of Chinese maritime grey-zone operations, not to mention the increase of their illegal, unreported,

and unregulated (IUU) fishing, and Chinese and Russian incursions into the Korean Air Defense Identification Zone. While this changing status quo around the peninsula might appear to give Seoul good reason to join the newer regional frameworks intended to enable joint responses to these changes, it is still lukewarm to all these regional initiatives.

In particular, trilateral cooperation between South Korea, the US, and Japan is a key mechanism to bring US allies into a united approach on China and to forge a concerted effort to denuclearise North Korea. Deep-seated distrust between Japan and South Korea, however, continues to be a hurdle to addressing those agendas. While President Moon has signalled his willingness to step back from vocal opposition to the 2015 South Korea–Japan “comfort women” agreement, Japan, confident in its full alignment with the US on China, has not yet reciprocated. Besides, on North Korea, Japan prioritises strengthening deterrence against the North’s provocations over engaging diplomatically. While the stakes for trilateral cooperation in the Indo–Pacific are high for both Seoul and Tokyo as capable allies of the US, their diverging priorities and unsettled animosity make this trilateral framework a worrying source of miscalculation among the revisionist powers in the region.

In a nutshell, South Korea’s security outlook for 2022 remains uncertain, and the likelihood of a breakthrough in a denuclearisation dialogue with Pyongyang that Seoul anxiously hopes for has probably diminished. Also, the grander strategic outlook that the US seems to be aiming for is not entirely compatible with South Korea’s peace process, which inevitably accommodates China to engage North Korea. Such tensions in objectives and priorities also make it unlikely that South Korea will be able to play its full part in shaping the wider Indo–Pacific region. Furthermore, the diverging threat perceptions between the two



15 September 2021. Seoul, ROK. South Korean Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong and his Chinese counterpart, Wang Yi, during bilateral talks at the Foreign Ministry. Credit: NEWS1.

allies—the US and South Korea—toward the North may well invite further provocations from the North and destabilise the peninsula.

Finally, South Korea’s presidential election in 2022 will pit the polarising foreign policy visions of the conservative and progressive candidates against each other, which could possibly bring substantial changes in Seoul’s approach to the North, the US, and the Indo–Pacific. While the Progressive campaign would mostly sustain the Moon administration’s existing foreign policies, the conservative campaign—with a number of candidates still competing in the primary—will provide a much more internationalist, alliance-oriented foreign policy overall, although some even emphasise the introduction of tactical nuclear weapons to maintain the balance of terror on the peninsula. This seemingly right-wing populist position of the conservative candidates, however, reflects the conservative voters’ grievance against the Moon administration’s North Korea policy. While it is premature to speculate on the outcome of the presidential elections, a change of the ruling party will definitely mean that South Korea’s foreign policy will be shaped by a different security outlook.

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## Australia in 2021: Crossing the Strategic Rubicon, or Setting the Stage for Future Challenges?

### Iain Henry

Events over the last year have provided significant grist for the mill of Australia's strategic commentariat. Four key events and developments—the inauguration of President Joe Biden, two evolutions of Australian strategic thought, the leader-level Quad summits, and the announcement of the Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) grouping—have strengthened Canberra's alignment with Washington. Though some have sought to proclaim the AUKUS agreement as the moment when Australia crossed “a strategic Rubicon,” in time we may look back on 2021 as the year when the debate started in earnest, and the stage was set for future challenges.

Many in Canberra exhaled sighs of relief when, on 20 January 2021, Joseph R. Biden was inaugurated as the 46th President of the United States. Within a month he had declared that “America is back,” promising to repair any alliance damage caused by the mercurial antics of President Trump. As the familiar names of old

bureaucratic friends began to line up against important positions at State, Defence, and the NSC, there was a palpable sense that Australia didn't need to adjust its television set, as normal programming had now resumed.

Canberra had actually, in the final days of the Trump administration, been primed for such a moment of optimism. In early January, Trump's National Security Adviser, Robert O'Brien, declassified a 2018 report on the *US Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific*. For many, this was manna from heaven: articulating the goal that the US “maintains diplomatic, economic, and military preeminence in the fastest-growing region of the world.” Various passages made it clear that Washington was now animated by a desire to outpace China's growth in all areas of power, and thus ensure that Beijing's power never eclipsed that held by the US. Biden himself endorsed and adopted this goal when, in March, he proclaimed that despite China's desire “to become...the most powerful country in the world...That's not going to happen on my watch because the

United States is going to continue to grow.”

However, in time we may come to identify that the most historic day of January 2021 was two weeks before Trump's inauguration, on January 6, when a collection of extremists and conspiracy theorists—egged on by Trump—stormed the US Capitol building in an effort to disrupt the certification of the 2020 election results. Since this event, numerous Republican politicians have refused to confirm the validity of Biden's victory, and some states have moved to tighten voter eligibility requirements. Partisan division and rancour in the US are intensifying at an alarming pace. Research suggests that 1 in 5 American adults believe that Joe Biden is an illegitimate president because his election victory was somehow stolen from Trump. Some *21 million* believe that the use of violent force would be just if it ensured that Donald Trump regained the presidency. These trends are routinely excluded from Australian commentary on US strategy, but they raise serious doubt about the stability and unity of our most important



16 September 2021. Canberra, Australia. Scott Morrison announces the AUKUS pact and nuclear submarine deal, with Boris Johnson and Joe Biden. Credit: Mick Tsikas / AAP.

“Canberra has not surrendered Australian sovereignty, as some were quick to argue, but because of AUKUS Canberra could face more dire and consequential choices—with less room to manoeuvre—in the future.”

international partner.

As 2021 progressed, two evolutions in Australian strategic thought could be observed. The first concerned the idea of order, which Canberra had emphatically embraced in the 2016 Defence White Paper. This document described order in strictly neutral terms: it was “a shared commitment by all countries to conduct their activities in accordance with agreed rules which evolve over time, such as international law and regional security arrangements.” Subsequently, officials and ministers hinted at their understanding of how this postwar order had, for the first three decades, deliberately excluded the People’s Republic of China. Foreign Minister Payne once acknowledged that the “rules and norms” of the order were “not necessarily static, but their reform should be pursued through negotiation, not...the exercise of power,” and the Foreign Affairs Secretary thought that Asia would “be respectful of [China’s] great power status when it...reaches that point.”

But more recently, such ideas have been gradually—perhaps enthusiastically—discarded. In late 2020, Prime Minister Morrison embraced an idea first laid out by Condoleezza Rice in 2002: a “balance of power that favours freedom.” By mid-2021 he was conceptualising a friendlier formulation—a “world order that favours freedom”—but his earlier comments suggest that the order he envisages is one characterised by a significant *imbalance* of power favouring liberal democracies against China. These ideas align neatly with the goals of the *US Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific* and Biden’s claim that “America is back,” and suggest a decisive shift of strategic thought in Canberra: under the Morrison government, Australia is now working not merely to maintain a rules-based global order, but to uphold American primacy in Asia. Given Beijing’s desire for greater regional influence, and new Australian language emphasising “freedom,” such a posture is implicitly hostile towards China.

If this argument about an unannounced policy shift is correct, then what underpins the change? This is the second evolution of Australian strategic thought which became evident in 2021: the belief that there is absolutely no prospect for any improvement in Australia’s relationship with China, and therefore there was no point trying to achieve it. Like the shift of focus from order to primacy, this hasn’t been explicitly announced. But a close examination of events, rhetoric, and political analyses suggest it is the case.

In April, a senior public servant—very likely with the blessing of Defence Minister Peter Dutton—warned that the “drums of war” were being beaten, and that Australia would not accept the loss of “our precious liberty.” Drawing directly on the language of the Cold War, he proclaimed that “Today, free nations continue still to face this sorrowful challenge.” In the same month, Canberra used newly passed legislation to abrogate a Belt and Road agreement between China and the Australian state of Victoria. In May, the Morrison government announced that it was seeking new advice on whether the lease of Darwin port, to a Chinese-owned company, remained in the national interest. Even some usually hawkishly-inclined commentators balked at this prospect, and warned that cancelling the deal would be counterproductive for both Australia’s relationship with China, and its reputation as a safe investment destination. Noting that the “review is driven by the political system,” Paul Kelly argued that any decision to intervene and terminate the contract would be a gratuitous and “far-reaching escalation of Australia’s tensions with China,” and warned of a danger “that the public debate on China is going off the rails. Talk of war needs to be curbed...This is our new normal, probably for years. We need to live with this reality.”

But this blunt and public warning from Kelly, the doyen of Australian political journalists, had no discernible effect on the government’s words and actions. The Morrison government

seems content with the current poor state of relations, and does not see the need for any Australian effort towards reconciliation. In September, Dutton intimated that all the responsibility for reducing tensions can be firmly placed upon Beijing. Asked if a war with China was possible, Dutton claimed that this was “a question for the Chinese,” and implied that an American defence of Taiwan would activate the ANZUS treaty. Such claims reveal how Australian thinking about China has evolved in the last year: everything is now purely China’s fault, and there is no need to even consider the possibility that Australian actions, or those of our allies, are contributing to escalating tensions. It appears that little thought is given to the relationship as an interactive, bilateral affair in a region beset with complicated historical legacies and tensions. Rather, the Morrison government regards this component of Australian strategy as a single-player game, with Chinese views of Australian or US policy something that should never be considered, let alone allowed to influence policy. Improvement in Australia-China ties, while Morrison remains Prime Minister, is now very unlikely.

In March (online) and September (in-person, in Washington), the leaders of the US, India, Japan and Australia met for the first two leader-level Quad summits. With China continuing to economically retaliate against Australia’s call, in 2020, for an inquiry into the origins of COVID-19, the Quad has taken on new significance in Australian thinking. For some, it serves almost as an emotional support group: allowing Australians to reassure themselves that “like-minded” partners continue to see China in the same “clear-eyed” manner as Australian leaders do. Though some commentators continue to downplay or dismiss the prospect of the Quad taking on military alliance-like qualities, other Quad watchers have now described it as “the best hope for building a successful balancing coalition in the Indo-Pacific.”

But it is far from certain that Australian thinking on these issues





11 September 2021. New Delhi, India. Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne and Defence Minister Peter Dutton meet with Prime Minister Narendra Modi following the 2+2 dialogue. Credit: Zee News.

is as clear-eyed as some claim. It is still unclear as to what precise issues would provide a sufficient community of interest for the Quad states to concert specific policies towards China. Certainly, the Australian experience so far has not been encouraging. Though Japan has insisted that “Australia is not walking alone,” and the US has promised that it “will not leave Australia alone on the field,” there has been no apparent action to counter China’s economic retaliation against Australia. Even though the January release of the *US Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific* revealed the existence of a *US Strategic Framework for Countering China’s Economic Aggression*, there is little indication of actual support from Australia’s “like minded” partners. Perhaps some Australian thinking is more wishful than “clear-eyed.”

The announcement of AUKUS, in September, prompted some observers to declare the Australian debate on China over. Unable to settle on a single idiom, one proclaimed that “Australia

has crossed a strategic Rubicon, bitten the bullet, nailed its colours to the mast...the die is cast. There is no going back.” But the sense of historically inevitability underpinning these claims is dangerous, and events subsequent to such ‘hot takes’ have provided a more complete context in which to situate analysis of AUKUS.

The AUKUS announcement is, undoubtedly, an important development for both its substantive and symbolic meaning. But Morrison’s unwise rhetoric of a “forever relationship” has generated worrying expectations in the United States. Professor Aaron Friedberg claimed that “if there’s a war, [Australia] will have to fight alongside [the] US.” Though it is entirely possible that Australia has made some secret promise to Washington, the publicly available information does not support Friedberg’s claim. But such beliefs do appear to be emerging, as an unnamed senior US official said that AUKUS “binds decisively Australia to the United States...for generations.” These ideas are not just incorrect,

but actually dangerous to Australia’s alliance with the US. The sharing of nuclear technology does not abrogate Australia’s sovereign decision-making rights, nor does it guarantee that US and Australian interests will always align. If Australian support in future conflicts is assumed, but not provided, then Washington’s sense of betrayal will be visceral, and could endanger the alliance.

Because AUKUS increases Australia’s reliance on the United States, it also provides Washington with additional leverage to use in intra-alliance bargaining. Canberra has not surrendered Australian sovereignty, as some were quick to argue, but because of AUKUS Canberra could face more dire and consequential choices—with less room to manoeuvre—in the future. Australia might be told that if it does not join a particular military campaign, or support a particular policy, then the US will no longer assist the submarine program. Australia should anticipate such risks and try to mitigate them. But unfortunately the Morrison government appears determined to overlook such possibilities, because its “forever partnership” marketing slogan implies that such dilemmas will never arise.

The events and developments described above have had a profound effect on Australia’s strategic outlook in 2021. But it’s far from clear that Australia’s new positions and sentiments will persist past the next election (or leadership spill). Also unknown is whether Australia will continue to hold fast to its current policy settings as competition in Asia, and great power pressures on Canberra, increase in the coming years. Only time will reveal whether 2021 represents the genuine inflection point that some claim it to be. The real decisions may still lie ahead, even if some have decided the Rubicon can now only be seen in the rear view mirror.

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# Indonesia's Security Outlook 2022: Has the External Environment Become Less Benign?

Rizal Sukma



25 April 2021. Jakarta, Indonesia. Leaders of ASEAN hold an emergency summit to discuss Myanmar. Credit: AP via Indonesian Presidential Palace / Laily Rachev.

For Indonesia, as the last two years have already been challenging enough, very few expected that the security outlook for 2022 could appear even worse and more complicated than it already was in 2021. Indonesia's chief security concerns remain internal in nature. Given an array of internal threats, ranging from terrorism, social and religious tensions, to the threat posed by armed insurgency in the restive Provinces of Papua and West Papua, concerns over internal stability will continue to feature prominently in Indonesia's security outlook in 2022.

The overall state of internal political stability, however, remains good. Joko

Widodo's government continues to command strong domestic supports both in the Parliament and among the public. The maintenance of political stability, however, will require effective control of the COVID-19 problem and a coherent plan to accelerate the post-pandemic economic recovery.

As Indonesia enters 2022, recent developments also suggest that the country would have to pay closer attention to the rapidly evolving security challenges in its external strategic environment in the Indo-Pacific. Indonesia is increasingly uncertain on how to respond to

the problem in the North Natuna Sea, which has been marked by the increasing frequency of Chinese vessels entering Indonesia's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Jakarta is also increasingly frustrated by the lack of progress in the resolution of the Myanmar crisis, which could have serious implications for regional stability. And, like any other country in the region, Indonesia is also increasingly concerned about the strategic implications of the growing rivalry between the United States and China. More specifically, Indonesia is concerned about the prospect of an arms race in the Indo-Pacific which, in Jakarta's view, is aggravated by the



“ASEAN cannot ignore the implications of the rivalry for the region, and the prospect of Southeast Asia becoming a central battleground between the two great powers is real. Greater understanding of the dynamics of strategic competition among major powers would help Indonesia, and ASEAN, to undertake strategic adjustments in order to strengthen the Association’s capacity and institutional effectiveness.”

formation of the trilateral security arrangement between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States (AUKUS) in September.

To Indonesia, the external environment has begun to feel less benign. The first indication of a less benign external environment relates to the dynamics in the South China Sea. Indonesia now has to deal with a new, more complicated set of problems at sea. In addition to the problem of illegal fishing that continues to irritate Jakarta, Indonesia’s waters and EEZ are now crowded by Chinese research vessels, coast guard boats and underwater drones. In January 2021, Indonesia’s Maritime Security Agency (Bakamla)

intercepted a Chinese research vessel Xiang Yang Hong 03 passing through the Sunda Strait with its automated identification system (AIS) turned off. At the end of 2020, Indonesia announced the discovery of a Sea Glider off South Sulawesi, suspected to be a Chinese Sea Wing (Haiyi) research glider even though it had no identifying marks. In September, Indonesia could only watch an incursion by a Chinese survey vessel and two Coast Guard boats into its EEZ north of the Natuna Islands, around a natural exploration site.

Even though the current government of President Joko Widodo has not complained, and has even tried to play down the problem, there is no guarantee that this issue will not come up again in the years ahead. In fact, if China’s vessels continue to enter Indonesia’s EEZ, they may not automatically violate the terms of UNCLOS, but they are likely to raise suspicion about China’s intention among Indonesian politicians and the public at large. For example, although the government remains silent on this issue, there have been suspicions that Chinese survey vessels were in fact carrying out unlawful research activities without proper permission from Indonesian authorities. Prominent Indonesian politicians began to frame the problem in terms of a threat to Indonesia’s sovereignty. The chairperson of Indonesia’s House of Representative (DPR), Puan Maharani, an influential leader of the ruling Partai Demokrasi Indonesia-Perjuangan (PDIP), has warned the government to take firm action against “Chinese vessels sailing around the Natunas”. The Deputy Chairman of DPR, Sufmi Dasco of Gerindra Party, even boasted that Indonesia’s purchase of frigates from the United Kingdom (UK) “would make China tremble.” These statements and responses clearly suggest that Indonesia-China relations, if not managed carefully, might be in for a rough ride in the years ahead.

Myanmar presents another headache for Indonesia and ASEAN. Indonesia has been playing a leading role in pushing ASEAN to address the Myanmar crisis since the coup on 1 February 2021. In addition to constituting a serious breach of ASEAN norms, the coup also carried potentially serious security consequences and implications for the region in its wake. As of early October 2021, it has been reported that more than 9,000 people have been detained, and 1,178 people have been killed by the military. The economy has also been hit hard and brings hardship to millions of Burmese. In July, the World Bank estimated that Myanmar’s economy in 2021 would contract by around 18 percent, and more than 1 million people could lose their jobs. It was also estimated that around 25 million people, or half of the population, risks falling into poverty by 2022. At the present time, more than 3 million people are in dire need of humanitarian assistance, and around 200,000 people have been internally displaced since the coup. Meanwhile, more than one million Rohingyas remain in refugee camps in neighbouring Bangladesh. As of early October, there have been almost 500,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Myanmar, and the number is still growing.

There is also the prospect of protracted armed conflict between the military and the resistance forces, which in turn, heightens the possibility of external interference and involvement. Concerns have been expressed in some quarters that any response to the problem should not push the junta in Myanmar to move closer to and become more dependent on China. While such concern about possible Myanmar dependence on China is still hard to ascertain, the junta has already forged closer ties with Russia. In this context, no one wants to take actions that could turn Myanmar into an open ground for competition for influence among major powers. To make things worse



16 September 2021. Panel on “The Future of Regional Order”, organised by CSIS, Indonesia as part of its 50th Anniversary Foreign Policy Dialogue. Credit: RSIS.

the Myanmar problem undermines ASEAN credibility and exposes the limits of ASEAN in managing and solving problems in member states and in its neighbourhood.

Indonesia’s third major security concern relates to the challenge of rivalry between the US and China and its attendant developments. This major geopolitical issue alone has already been worrying enough for Indonesia and all Southeast Asian countries. In the face of such rivalry, neither ASEAN unity nor ASEAN strategic autonomy can be guaranteed. Moreover, the dynamics of major power strategic rivalry often generates regional uncertainty, affects regional stability, and shapes the strategic environment adversely for the middle and smaller powers in the region. Now, it seems that Indonesian officials have included the formation of AUKUS as further evidence of the increasingly less friendly external environment. Instead of seeing the AUKUS as a response to the perceived China threat, and therefore a natural outcome of US-China strategic rivalry, Jakarta saw the trilateral defence technology arrangement as a cause for concern. Indonesian officials, especially at the Foreign Ministry, believed that Australia’s plan to have nuclear-powered submarines by 2040 under the AUKUS is likely to trigger an arms race in the Indo-Pacific, weaken the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), and undermine the Southeast Asian Nuclear Weapon Free Zone

(SEANWFZ). That is why, according to officials, Indonesia needs to “cautiously take note” of the AUKUS development.

It is important for Indonesia, as mentioned earlier, to look at the AUKUS partnership as simply a logical consequence of US-China rivalry. China, as a rising power, and especially given the spectacular increase in its military capability and growing political influence, is perceived by the US to have the potential to upset the balance of power. In such circumstances, the US is compelled to push back in order to ensure its supremacy and military preponderance. Strengthening the alliance relationship – in this context manifested in the establishment of the AUKUS arrangement— constitutes a realistic strategic choice for the US.

The AUKUS should also be understood as a result of the growing perceptions in Australia of China as a threat. Whether or not such perceptions correspond with the reality is beside the point. The fact is, when a state feels that its sovereignty and national security is being threatened by a stronger power, it will seek a strategy to address that threat. One available strategy is alliance-making and balancing. If an alliance already exists, the natural step is to strengthen it. AUKUS, especially Australia’s position in it, reflects this logic of realpolitik.

Indonesia, and ASEAN countries, necessarily also need to also pay attention to how China’s military build-up has progressed over the last two decades and how that has affected, and will continue to affect, regional security. ASEAN has to accept the fact that the rivalry between the two great powers will become a key defining feature of international relations in the years to come. ASEAN cannot ignore the implications of the rivalry for the region, and the prospect of Southeast Asia becoming a central battleground between the two great powers is real. Greater understanding of the dynamics of strategic competition among major powers would help Indonesia, and ASEAN, to undertake strategic adjustments in order to strengthen the Association’s capacity and institutional effectiveness.

ASEAN has become an overly normative-oriented regional institution and, as a result, is no longer well equipped to deal with the evolving geopolitical challenges in the Indo-Pacific. One of those challenges is how to preserve ASEAN unity in the face of the divisive nature of great power politics. Indonesia therefore needs to convince other member states that ASEAN must adapt and change. The formulation and adoption of a distinct ASEAN outlook on Indo-Pacific (AOIP), for example, constitutes an important step in that direction. Other steps, such as the revision of the ASEAN Charter and the institutionalisation of the East Asia Summit (EAS), could also be considered. In other words, ASEAN needs bold ideas and initiatives if it is to maintain its centrality and relevance. Indonesia’s national security, and the stability of Southeast Asia, will to a certain degree depend on ASEAN’s ability to change.

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## Thai Perspectives on the Regional Security Outlook

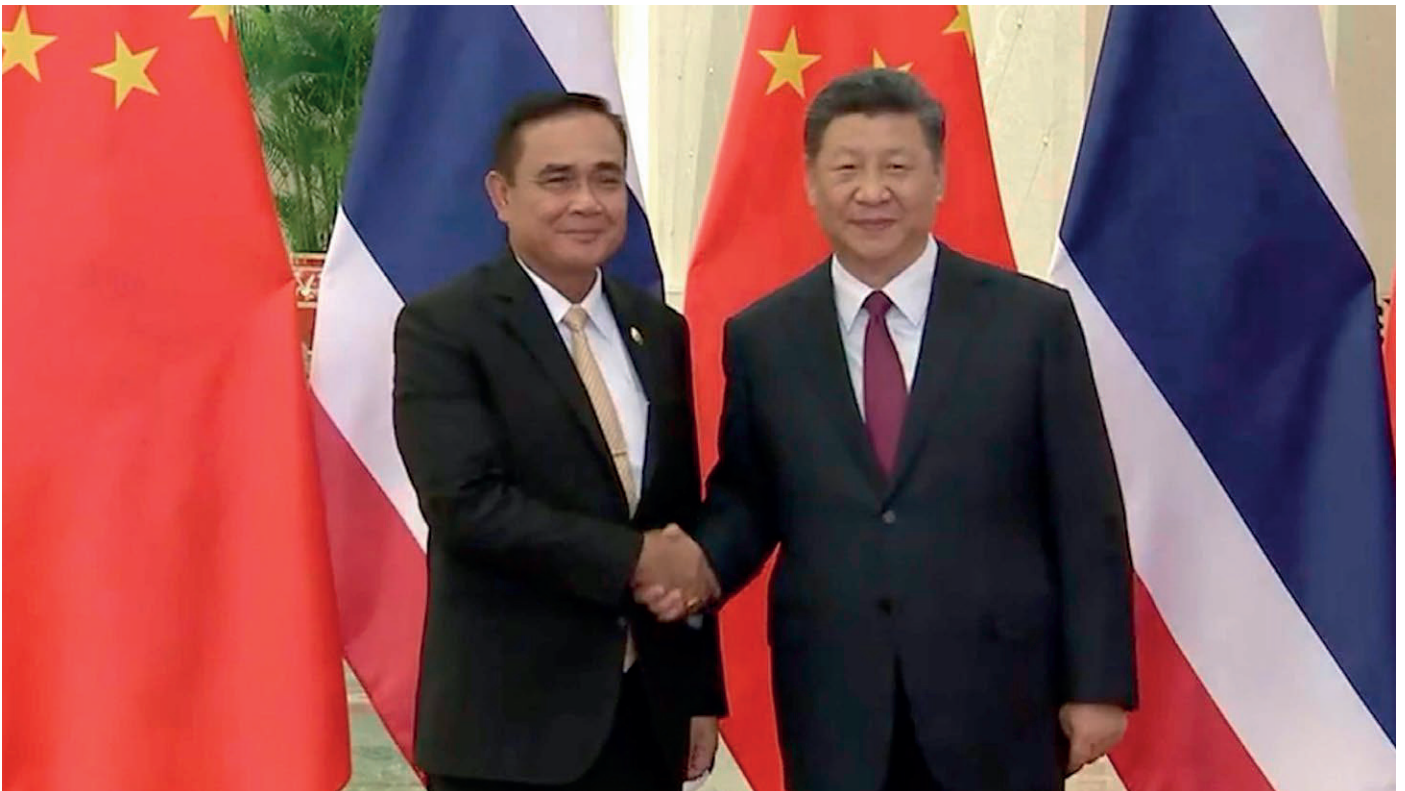
### Kavi Chongkittavorn

A rising China and relentless attempts by the West and its allies to slow down this trend will continue to dominate the strategic environment in Southeast Asia in the years if not decades to come. Each country in the region will be affected and subsequently have to navigate and tackle emerging challenges resulting from all forms of the two superpowers' competition. While it might act based on its interests and circumstances at a particular time, each player will have one common objective in mind—a deeper and wider regional interest in stability and peace and strengthened governance. The battle for supremacy will be determined in Southeast Asia, located in the centre of the Indo-Pacific.

During the Cold War, Southeast Asia was divided into three camps—the free, the communist and the socialist. At the time, the free world was associated with the United States while the communists were on the side of the former Soviet Union. The divide was clear. Then there was one country, Myanmar, formerly Burma, a socialist nation that liked to stay out of the loop and act and suffer alone. After the end of the Indochina War in the 1970s and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the ideological line blurred and turned benign. By the late 1990s, all Southeast Asian nations were under the same roof, trying to build a regional community of 655 million people, known as ASEAN. For the past five decades, the regional bloc has been enjoying a

peaceful rise and progress in each of its member's economies, which has contributed to its growing importance in the regional and global political scheme of things.

ASEAN was born of the mistrust of the smaller decolonised countries in the region of major powers from the West. They feared they could be swallowed up anytime. During the early days of ASEAN, each member, especially Indonesia and Malaysia, was quite obsessed with the construction of new regional mechanisms that would prevent external powers from harming or interfering in their affairs. Three key instruments, which are still relevant today, are the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN), the Southeast Asian Nuclear Weapons



23 April 2021. Beijing, China. Chinese President Xi Jinping meets with Thai Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha ahead of the second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation. Credit: CGTN.

“The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) remains the most acceptable and inclusive set of guidelines to facilitate impartial cooperation with outside powers.”

Free Zone (SEANWFZ), and the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC).

The new strategic environment has witnessed increased involvement in the region in all dimensions by the major powers. The variety of strategic and cooperative frameworks for the Indo-Pacific including the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and the new military alliance between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States (AUKUS) are good barometers. While all have commonalities that instil confidence in constructive engagement and peaceful coexistence, eyebrows are still raised given the potential for strategic rivalries to heighten tensions and stimulate an arms race.

Needless to say, there are still possibilities for maintaining stability and prosperity in the region if ASEAN can nurture and strengthen its centrality and solidarity. The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) remains the most acceptable and inclusive set of guidelines to facilitate impartial cooperation with outside powers. Now the challenge is to operationalise the AOIP, which has been delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although ASEAN’s major dialogue partners have expressed support for the AOIP and ASEAN

centrality, they have yet to align specific areas of cooperation with the bloc. For the time being, Japan is the only country to pledge (in 2020) to work out a common plan with ASEAN on their Indo-Pacific frameworks.

China and Russia remain reluctant to associate with the AOIP, viewing it as the product of the United States and its allies to contain them. ASEAN has reiterated that AOIP is an indigenous idea deriving from the bloc’s desire to pull in and utilise available resources and know-how from all of its dialogue partners without any favour. In recent years, ASEAN has expanded and deepened its partnership with dialogue partners and non-ASEAN countries. At the ASEAN summit in Brunei Darussalam in November 2021, China and Australia were granted comprehensive strategic partnership status. In August, The United Kingdom was admitted as ASEAN’s 11th dialogue partner. The bloc broke the three-decade old moratorium to favour one of the most influential former members of the EU, much to the chagrin of more than two dozen countries on the waiting list. In the months to come, the European Union will be a stronger focus of ASEAN’s external engagement. Brussels has also sent a strong signal that the two regional organisations need closer cooperation in all dimensions to reduce negative and unintended repercussions from the strategic competition of superpowers in the region.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the quandary in Myanmar have exposed ASEAN strengths and weaknesses. These dual new challenges have encouraged all members to consult with one another even more in order to achieve consensus. Due to the complexities of the issues involved, disagreements among the ASEAN members have grown proportionately. But they are not something new as each member has its own national

interest and threat perception. But in the end, ASEAN always achieves consensus on the collective interest as a basis to move ahead.

The Myanmar crisis has highlighted the important role played by ASEAN in managing and solving its own problems. Key issues related to ASEAN relevancy, decision-making process and in-house capacity are raised and discussed whenever the group faces a crisis. In the case of Myanmar, ASEAN will play by the book to ensure the cooperation of all parties with a stake in the dispute in building a durable solution, just as the bloc has done in the past. These days, however, there is the additional difficulty of social media and fake news stirring up criticism and creating misperceptions and misunderstanding of ASEAN’s current political and economic undertakings. Obviously, a better and consistent communication strategy with the public at large is needed to weigh the bloc’s dealings with media-focused issues. For instance, anger and grievances against ASEAN among the people of Myanmar could be mitigated if there was fact-based information and regular communication to concerned communities both in and outside the country about the progress made and challenges lying ahead.

At the special ASEAN-China Foreign Ministerial Meeting in Chongqing in June 2021, Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai proposed the idea of an ASEAN plus Two forum, which will enable representatives of both the US and China to exchange views with the participation of ASEAN members. It could start at a level where all sides feel comfortable and gradually progress toward more senior levels of participation as mutual trust increases. The rationale for the idea is simple enough: instead of having to worry and suffer unintended consequences emanating from their





3 August 2021. Thailand. Opening ceremony of Exercise Cobra Gold 2021. Credit: Ng Eng Hen / Facebook.

strategic rivalries, ASEAN can tap both superpowers' resources for constructive engagements and outcomes. For instance, ASEAN members are still in need of vaccines for their 650-million strong community and the US and China are the two major sources of such vaccines. Timely access to their vaccines at reasonable prices would help to facilitate and to plan for the economic recovery of the region. At the proposed forum, other non-traditional issues, including the impacts of climate change and cybersecurity, could be discussed.

Thailand hopes that both superpowers could use ASEAN as an incubator for joint projects or cooperation under numerous ASEAN-led mechanisms in the future. The ongoing US-China

rivalries have caused serious concerns among ASEAN leaders that their conflict would further divide the bloc's solidarity and obstruct future economic integration and well-being in the ASEAN community. Currently, ASEAN has several formulas for consultation with its dialogue partner such as ASEAN plus One, ASEAN plus Three (Japan, China, South Korea) and ASEAN plus Eight (East Asia Summit). At these meetings, certain transnational and cross-sectorial issues have been taken up and addressed collaboratively to improve the efficiency of implementing projects and plans

All things considered, Thailand is situated at the crossroads of the competition between the world's key players trying simultaneously to

sustain and expand their footholds. Bangkok has been extremely cautious not to upset the longstanding balance between the two superpowers. The absence of strong and visible views on strategic matters is consistent with the endeavour of Thai policy-makers to retain leverage and manoeuvring space. Thailand hopes that the proposal would be endorsed in future ASEAN meetings next year.

### **Kavi Chongkittavorn**

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# Malaysia's 2022 Security Outlook: Seeking Sanctuary through Talk that Differs from Actions Likely to Get Harder

Steven Wong



6 October 2021. Exercise Bersama Gold 2021, launched online. Credit: MINDEF / Government of Singapore.

Looking out the windows of Putrajaya in 2022, one should expect to see familiar contestations, probably amped-up on steroids. The responses, in local idiom, are likely to continue to be *cakap tak serupa bikin* (talk that differs from actions).

In the foreground are Malaysia's contested claims and jurisdictions in its part of the South China Sea (SCS) and rising geopolitical tensions among major (and not-so-major) powers—which are the subject of this article. In mid-ground are the security implications of forced migration arising from the political instability in Myanmar and Afghanistan, and the perennial problem of still-porous state borders in East Malaysia. Not out of the picture by any means is the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, cyber and technology threats, economic recovery and resilience, political and social cohesion, and religious extremism.

Informed security analysts know by now that, both out of conviction and necessity, Malaysian policymakers typically dial-down real threats and risks of conflict and talk-up normative values of dialogue and cooperation. These can give the impression of being 'schizophrenic' and 'out-of-touch' with realities, but it is simply not perceived to be in the country's political, economic, or social interests to do otherwise—not even when the rhetoric is at odds with actual intentions and actions.

This is expected to remain the *modus operandi* through 2022 and beyond, despite ominous pressures of a changed environment and changing realities. From time to time though, issues are treated in an eyebrow-raising manner. These need to be looked at more carefully to distil their significance and implications.

Consider the widely publicised 31 May 2021 flight of 16 Chinese military transport planes in “tactical

formation” over Malaysia's newest (and contested) Kasawari gas field, 60 nautical miles off the coast of northern Sarawak. Maritime and air encounters in Malaysia's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) have now become almost mundane affairs. Overflights by Chinese military aircraft and in such large numbers, however, are not. Radio silence was kept after being hailed, forcing Malaysian jets to be scrambled to intercept and identify them. Unusually, the Malaysian air force chief was first out of the blocks with a detailed statement on the incident. Service chiefs do not do so as a matter of course.

Amid a public uproar, not least by East Malaysian politicians, this was later followed by the foreign minister who announced the issuance of a diplomatic protest note and summoning of the Chinese ambassador. Demarches are also regularly issued without much



“The US and other Quad countries at least are expected to maintain an annual presence in the region in support of a “free and open Indo Pacific” but at mounting costs. China, meanwhile, can afford a long game and patiently wait for breaks in resolve.”

public fanfare. Checks with informed sources about this incident suggest that it was a mix of surprise, initial misunderstanding of the flight path, and the need to counter political accusations that the country’s interests were not being defended that contributed to the response rather than any official intent to depart from standard practice.

Indeed, a Chinese Coast Guard vessel continued to dog Malaysian supply vessels in the area even after the May overfly (until at least early July) with little further public disclosure or official comment. In early October, Chinese vessels again entered the EEZ and incurred yet another Malaysian protest and summoning of the ambassador. This time, details of what, where and when of the incursion were not disclosed.

Despite its close-quarter travails, Malaysia insists that foreign military presence in the SCS complicates matters for littoral states. This position was tested directly in 2020 when foreign military presence operations were conducted in apparent defence of Malaysian interests. In the tense April-May

2020 incident, the US navy sent ships on two occasions close to a Malaysian-contracted drillship, the West Capella, the second time with Australian navy participation. In response, China is reported to have sent in its navy. What escaped the notice of many were also deployments of US strategic bombers and submarines in the region around this time. This evidently included flights by a US B-1 Lancer and a Chinese H-6 bomber in the vicinity of the West Capella. There is no evidence that Malaysia was informed about these presence operations. This seems to be borne out by knowledgeable US naval commentators who urged the US to closely coordinate its activities with Malaysia.

At that time, Malaysia’s foreign minister distanced the country from these military manoeuvres by expressing concerns that they increased the risks of incidents that could affect peace and stability. These risks, however, are not considered to apply to Malaysia, which regularly trains with passing foreign navies. If there were any doubts as to who Malaysia’s security ‘partners’ are, they were dispelled in 2021. In April, the Malaysian air force did just that by conducting bilateral dissimilar air combat training with the nuclear-powered USS *Theodore Roosevelt* Carrier Strike Group.

As a side note, the month before, Malaysia officially launched its very first squadron of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV) comprising the first lot of Boeing ScanEagles provided under the US’ (Indo-Pacific) Maritime Security Initiative (MSI). The ScanEagles were delivered the previous year, even as the West Capella encounter was ongoing, after which followed a year of training. The MSI also involves the conversion of two transport planes to a maritime patrol configuration to increase domain awareness.

In mid-August, the country participated in the US-led 21-nation (without China) Southeast Asian Cooperation and Training (SEACAT), and later in the month, in Australia’s premier engagement, Indo-Pacific Endeavour 21—to virtually no domestic publicity. In contrast, high profile was given in October to the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary meetings of the Five Power Defence Arrangement (Australia, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore, and the UK) hosted by Malaysia, and ending with an air and sea exercise codenamed Bersama Gold 2021.

On 1 September, China made its move by announcing the enforcement of its Maritime Traffic Safety Law (MTSL). There is no clarity over China’s intention to apply the MTSL within its claimed (but legally undefined) ‘nine-dash line’ but there is an expectation that it will do so. Unlike the Philippines, Malaysia still has not officially reacted to it. Given the critical importance of the oil and gas activities in its EEZ, the government’s political reliance on East Malaysian states, and, notably, the July 2020 legal position taken on China’s claims, Malaysia is unlikely to comply even if China elects to police compliance with its directive.

In July 2020, Malaysia had responded to China’s earlier *note verbale* objecting to the former’s establishment of its outer limits beyond 200 nautical miles, in accordance with Article 76(8) of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). In the response to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf, Malaysia not only reiterated its legitimate rights but went one step further to reject in writing China’s claims of historical and other sovereign rights and jurisdictions “*in the relevant part of its ‘nine-dash line’*” as having “no basis under international law”. For a country that places very high priority



2 April 2021. Beijing, China. Malaysian Foreign Minister Hishammuddin Hussein with China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi.  
Credit: Hishammuddin Hussein / Facebook.

on its relations with China, especially during Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak's tenure (2009-2018), this was strong stuff. Najib had expanded cooperation with China into military procurement and naval exercises, including in the Strait of Malacca.

Malaysia's initial submission in December 2019 triggered a flurry of third-party notes from eight other non-claimant states – Indonesia, the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Japan, and New Zealand – as of August 2021. What would have otherwise been a further bone of contention among claimant states (China, Vietnam, and the Philippines), as China and some ASEAN states wanted, thus became an international matter, with countries (notably the US) formally stating their positions on the legality of Chinese claims. Even so, the heated

submission of diplomatic notes could have largely remained a matter of record but for the breathtaking military hyperactivity on the water and in the air in 2021.

After the August SEACAT 2021, the first phase of Exercise Malabar 2021 commenced in the Philippine Sea, with Quadrilateral Strategic Dialogue Countries' (Quad) navies participating. The UK sailed its Carrier Strike Group 21, centred around its new HMS *Queen Elizabeth*, on long deployment, while from Europe, France sent a nuclear-powered attack submarine and two vessels, and the Netherlands and Germany, the latter for the first time in 20 years, each sent a warship. All have been met with critical responses by China, with the German warship reportedly being denied permission to berth at one of its ports.

Early October saw one of the biggest massing of navies, with Canada, the Netherlands, and New Zealand, joining the US, the UK and Japan, resulting in a flotilla totalling 500,000 displacement tons. It has been reported that these were shadowed by Chinese ships. Officially, these deployments were made to demonstrate commitment to the rule of law, freedom of navigation and support for countries in the region. Some navies also chose to run the gauntlet in the Taiwan Strait. The messages sent could not have been made clearer. How long and consistently such activities can be kept up and how far they will go is not known. The US and other Quad countries at least are expected to maintain an annual presence in the region in support of a "free and open Indo Pacific" but at mounting costs.



China, meanwhile, can afford a long game and patiently wait for breaks in resolve. The time gained will offer it the opportunity to further enhance its military and technological capabilities and strengthen its own cooperation. In mid-October, Chinese and Russian navies resumed their own Joint Sea exercises in the Russian ‘Far East’ and then, in their own show of resolve, sailed through Japan’s Tsugaru Strait.

Given its extensive engagements, why has Malaysia, along with Indonesia, taken a strong stance against the Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) pact announced on 15 September? AUKUS is a tripartite deal for nuclear power technology sharing with Australia, although cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence, and quantum computing have also been included. Malaysia’s objections were ostensibly that the arrangement would “catalyse” a nuclear arms race in the region and “provoke *other* powers to act more aggressively”. Indonesia used perhaps the more apt description of the “continuing” arms race. If there was any doubt about who the ‘other powers’ might be, Malaysia’s newly appointed defence minister and former foreign minister seemed to answer the question by stating in Parliament that he would seek the views of “China’s leadership on AUKUS”. Whether such consultation was really needed was questionable. China, which already has the largest submarine fleet in the region—including nuclear-powered and ballistic missile armed ones—had, by that time, made its views on AUKUS clear in any case.

Malaysia cited its neutrality and opposition to nuclear powered submarines operating in its waters. That the primary purpose of these submarines is stealth, and that Australia would have nothing to put in the water for up to three decades

anyway, seemed not to matter. Like Indonesia, Malaysia also expressed concerns about ASEAN positions on the region being sidelined, although how clear and decisive these positions really are at the present time is questionable. It is a matter of personal inference but opposition to AUKUS may have been intended at least as much for ‘third-party effect’ as substance. Simply put, Malaysia can still afford to take the moral high ground on the issue without compromising actual interests and practices.

Despite the changing status quo, Malaysia still wants to manoeuvre from safe positions in 2022 and beyond, while it is feasible to do so. Being backed into a corner would be among the worst security outcomes, which it will want to avoid. If China plays the patient waiting game, if Western political resolve dissipates (as has happened elsewhere), or if an actual conflict is triggered, whether in disputed waters or over Taiwan, Malaysia faces long-term consequences it can ill afford. Malaysia’s predicaments and strategies are well enough understood by its security partners and China so that not all its statements are taken at face value. For them, it is the utility of actions rather than statements that count.

In 2022, however, with rising geopolitical animosities, even talk, especially when unmeasured, will not come cheaply, and Malaysia’s evergreen strategy of *cakap tak serupa bikin* is likely to come under pressure.

### Steven Wong

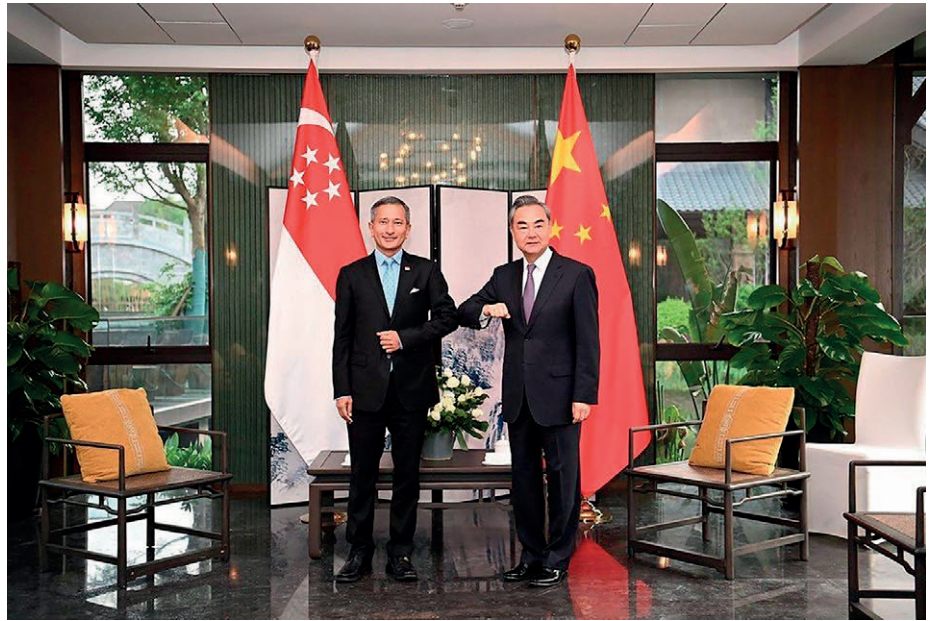
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# Singapore's Regional Outlook: Geopolitical Flux and a Post-COVID Regional Order

Sinderpal Singh and Adrian Tan

In several ways, the onset of the pandemic in 2020 has led to a fundamental change in the domestic and global milieus in which policymakers make major medium-term decisions relating to national security. In other ways, the pandemic has hastened the effects of certain emerging trends which developed prior to the pandemic, and which will continue to shape perceptions of national security into 2022. Lastly, certain longer term structural characteristics of the global and regional order will persist in shaping the security outlooks of states in 2022. Singapore's security outlook in 2022 will continue to be influenced by all three sets of factors and in many ways, they would impinge on each other. The key challenge will be managing the potential consequences arising from the intensifying rivalry between the United States (US) and China while simultaneously dealing with significant changes in Singapore's regional and domestic domains. Some of these changes also afford Singapore opportunities to re-fashion its relevance both regionally and globally, especially as the nature of Singapore's economy and its demography undergo their own transformation.

Singapore's key external challenge will be managing the possible consequences of the contentious relations between the United States and China. The deteriorating



31 Mar 2021. State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi with Dr Vivian Balakrishnan, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Singapore in Fujian. Credit SCMP.

relationship between these two countries in 2021 seems likely to endure into 2022, despite hopes that the election of Joe Biden might help reverse some of steep downturn in relations incurred during the Trump presidency. A key driving principle behind Singapore's foreign policy is maintaining agency especially in the context of the US-China relationship. There is, however, finite agency in the context of decreasing shared interests between the US and China and this consequently reduces Singapore's strategic options. To a significant degree, Singapore views a strategic status quo in East Asia as favourable and this has likely shaped its view on the recently announced AUKUS agreement. The key is maintaining a fine balance between supporting a broad strategic status quo in East Asia while also allowing for some amount of change in East Asia to accommodate China's growing power and stature. The nature of China's response, both short and medium term, to AUKUS, would be critical for Singapore, as it would for other Southeast Asian states.

For Singapore, the Biden presidency does however bring a greater amount of predictability to US foreign policy, and with it some hope that in 2022, the two sides would be able to come to some form of compromise to at least prevent a further deterioration in bilateral relations. More recently, however, the issue of Taiwan has once again become a site of increasingly tense rhetoric between the US and China, and this has the potential for miscalculation that could lead to possible limited hostilities between the two countries. Countries in the region, in such a situation, could potentially be driven to indicate their allegiances to one of the two sides, engulfing the region in a broader cycle of hostilities and possibly conflict. This would be disastrous for the region. The Taiwan issue, against the backdrop of increasingly hostile relations between the US and China, could potentially be a key flashpoint in 2022 if not managed carefully by all parties.

More broadly, Singapore is watching the re-emergence of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) with some concern especially in the context of China's progressively deteriorating



“The key is maintaining a fine balance between supporting a broad strategic status quo in East Asia while also allowing for some amount of change in East Asia to accommodate China’s growing power and stature.”

relationship with not only the US but also India and Australia. The Quad is seen as bifurcating the region strategically as well as undermining ASEAN’s aim to play the role of an honest broker in the region. Singapore has been a keen supporter of India playing a bigger role within East Asia, as part of its wider strategy of maintaining a stable balance of power within the region. India’s recent decision to not join the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) has signalled a wider Indian desire to progressively de-couple itself economically from China and is seen as a significant setback for the future of India’s enmeshment within the multilateral ecosystem in East Asia. The deteriorating security relationship between India and China, caused largely by a continuous stand-off and localised skirmishes at their mutual border, has shifted India’s attitude towards China and has had negative impacts for Southeast Asia. India’s earlier Look East Policy and even the more recent Act East Policy viewed Southeast Asia and ASEAN as an important aspect of its engagement with China, a stance that was positively received in Southeast

Asia. However, more recently, there is a growing sense that India views Southeast Asia and ASEAN as lacking the ability to moderate China’s behaviour and the border stand-off has shifted Indian policy away from a managed rivalry with China to a posture of more openly balancing against it. It has thus moved to bolster its defence relations with the US and its allies, namely Japan and Australia, as it perceives the space for a broader India-China accommodation to be shrinking. For Singapore, this is a negative development especially since India has progressively placed more of its faith in the Quad rather than ASEAN-led processes and institutions in East Asia. Singapore will also have to watch India’s strategic response to AUKUS, which will likely strengthen its views on China.

Regionally, there have been several developments in Southeast Asia which have raised concerns for Singapore. Developments in Myanmar rank very high amongst this set of developments, as Singapore, together with the other ASEAN countries seek to lend its good offices to prevent further conflict and civilian deaths in Myanmar. Singapore’s political leaders have made clear statements on the need to stop civilian deaths in Myanmar, underlining concerns that the country was hurtling towards a full-blown civil war. In such a situation, in addition to the humanitarian tragedy, there will be more opportunities afforded to external powers to expand their influence in Myanmar, which would potentially roll back efforts by Singapore and ASEAN over several years aimed at facilitating the Myanmar government’s attempts to chart a more independent foreign policy. Presently, the military regime in Myanmar seems disinclined to abide by an earlier understanding reached with ASEAN on steps to be taken to reduce violence as well as start the process towards some

form of talks with the National Unity Government (NUG) in Myanmar. Overall, the current situation in Myanmar is of concern to Singapore and the military’s seeming determination to not compromise with the NUG does not provide much confidence for the outlook in Myanmar into 2022. Myanmar will likely continue with its current downward trajectory, and we can expect more violence and instability in the year ahead. ASEAN’s recent decision to only accept a non-political representative from Myanmar for its annual summit in 2021 signalled its determination to continue to hold the military government accountable for its agreement with ASEAN. The military’s decision to not send any representative has called into question Myanmar’s long-term future within ASEAN as well as its ability to avoid an over-reliance on China in the near future. ASEAN is now in uncharted waters – how the Myanmar issue plays out will likely have a significant impact on its future, especially for its credibility. Over the next few months, Singapore, together with other like-minded ASEAN countries, will likely maintain some collective pressure on the military regime in Myanmar, to force it to begin implementing the Five Points Consensus agreed in April 2021 with ASEAN. Unfortunately, it does not look like there will be any movement on this front for the foreseeable future.

Singapore’s economic success is built on the principle of free and open movement of goods and peoples. The onset of border closures globally as well as severe disruptions to global and regional supply chains have adversely impacted Singapore’s economy disproportionately as compared to most other countries. Singapore’s own border closures specifically impacted various segments of its economy, given Singapore’s position as a global hub



21 July 2021. Singapore. US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin honoured by Singapore's army during visit with Singapore Defense Minister Ng Eng Hen. Credit: Singapore's Defense Ministry / Kyodo.

as well as its reliance on a foreign workforce, which supplements its resident population workforce. The increasing vulnerability of supply chains, under conditions of relative scarcity caused by the pandemic, as well as increasing geopolitical rivalry, is a key concern for Singapore. This disruption to supply chains has unfortunately led to stronger calls within various countries for greater domestic self-reliance, further fuelling pre-pandemic sentiments for increasing trade protectionism in various parts of the world. These rising domestic sentiments have been accompanied by a deeper propensity towards a bifurcation of both trade and technology networks driven by increasing geopolitical competition between the US and China. Singapore will be significantly impacted by these developments which inescapably retard the open trading system on which it relies on for its

economic success. A key response to such developments would be for Singapore to increasingly diversify its sources and reliable partners to safeguard against global supply chain vulnerabilities. This would be a continuation of Singapore's broader strategic policy of diversifying its options and not choosing sides even as a deeper de-coupling gains momentum in the economic and technology domains between the US and China.

The pandemic, while presenting a host of setbacks, also presents Singapore with an opportunity for a fundamental transformation of its economy. Two key post-pandemic opportunities for Singapore's economy lie in digital transformation and sustainable technologies. The pandemic has accelerated the increasing importance of the global virtual economy and potentially allows Singapore to transcend its small geographical size by gaining an increasing share of this

global virtual marketplace for goods and services. The increasing salience of the global 'green economy' is a related phenomenon and Singapore's strengths as a key financial centre grants it the opportunity to create a niche for itself in areas such as carbon trading and green financing. This economic transformation will potentially fulfil Singapore's longer-term aim of preserving its relevance within the global economy as well as improving the future economic well-being of its citizens. Economic security has been a key part of Singapore's broader strategy of surviving as a small state within the global system and taking advantage of these potential opportunities will be crucial in the pursuit of this goal.

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## A Philippine View of the Regional Security Outlook: Is Everything Back where it Should Be?

**Herman Joseph S. Kraft**

When he took over the Presidency of the Philippines in 2016, Rodrigo Duterte managed to shake up the political balance of the region with his avowed desire to bring the Philippines in closer alignment with the “ideological persuasion” of China and Russia. His declaration of “separation” from the United States, an eventual threat to abrogate the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), and the soft-handed approach to Chinese activities in the West Philippine Sea seemed to point to a rebalancing of political forces in the region. Towards the end of his term as President, however, things seem to be in their proper place once again. The abrogation of the VFA has been discontinued, joint exercises between the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and the US military have been reinstated, and the Philippine government has become more outspoken about China’s overreach into waters over which the Philippines rightfully claim sovereign rights. As far as the Philippines is concerned, the alignment of forces in the region has reverted to its “natural” state.

Yet, this view of a return to “normal” must be situated in a geopolitical context which has if anything continued to deteriorate from the already difficult situation at the start of 2021, dominated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the intensifying competition for influence over the region between the United

15 August 2021.  
Philippine Navy Boarding Team simulates a vessel boarding as part of this year’s SEACAT exercise.  
Credit: Philippine Navy.





“There was always a vague expectation based on past experience that pandemics would lead to an intensification of cooperation and strengthening of institutional arrangements that would facilitate responses to common existential threats.”

States and China. In fact, these two conditions overlap in the arena that the pandemic has wrought for this rivalry, i.e. access to vaccines for countries in Southeast Asia. The Philippines has been among the most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic among countries in Southeast Asia. The Duterte Administration has had the country or parts of it in some form of a lockdown since 15 March 2020. Certainly, Metro Manila has been the centre of this emergency measure from the very start. The total number of recorded cases had reached more than 2.5 million by November 2021, with more than 40,000 deaths. The measures taken to address the pandemic had led to the contraction of the economy in 2020 by 9.6%. The expectation is that the Philippine economy is not going to reach pre-pandemic levels of productivity until 2023. Even then, this would all depend on the rate at which the economy could be opened up as more Filipinos are fully vaccinated against COVID-19. By November 2021, some 32% had been fully vaccinated – still far below the targeted 90% needed to have herd immunity and move

the Philippines back to “normal”. In this context, access to vaccines (and even the type of vaccines) has been a central theme of Philippine foreign relations. Arguably, it has even become an indication of how the Duterte Administration swung on its geopolitical calculations.

There was always a vague expectation based on past experience that pandemics would lead to an intensification of cooperation and strengthening of institutional arrangements that would facilitate responses to common existential threats. COVID-19, however, sharpened the competition between the United States and China. China was able to one up the United States with its vaccine diplomacy as it was able to provide supplies of its anti-COVID-19 vaccines (Sinovac or Sinopharm) to developing nations that had little access to other coronavirus vaccines. In the case of the Philippines, Sinovac vaccines constituted the bulk of the first vaccines that were available at a time when other (more effective) brands were being held back by the governments of the producing countries for use on their own populations. To date, the supply of Sinovac constitutes the largest volume of vaccines that have been made available to Filipinos and is considered to have played a significant role against the pandemic, especially in mitigating the effects of the surge of the Delta variant in Metro Manila. For Duterte, this seemed to affirm the wisdom of the approach he took in seeking better relations with China from the start of his Administration.

That pro-China stance, however, had been criticised by Philippine foreign policy observers especially since it made the Duterte administration more circumspect on the country's territorial dispute with China over the maritime domain of the West

Philippine Sea. The pugnacious Duterte was always noticeably silent in speaking out against Chinese activities in the maritime domain over which the Philippines had sovereign rights as affirmed by the Permanent Court of Arbitration Award of 2016. This became particularly deafening when the presence of more than 200 vessels widely believed to be part of the maritime militia maintained by China as part of its aggressive grey zone tactics was discovered anchored in the waters off the disputed Whitsun Reef in March 2021. More strategically, the “pivot to China” seemed to come at the cost of weakening the foundations of the long-standing alliance between the Philippines and the United States. In fact, 2021 started with the threat of the abrogation of the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) between the US and the Philippines seemingly held hostage to the whims of President Duterte.

Interestingly, the same vaccine diplomacy that seemed to be so affirmative of the importance of the approach taken by the Duterte Administration towards China was also responsible for eventually taking out the threat to the VFA. The abrogation of the VFA was in fact not just about the VFA itself. It was a concern with potential implications for the entire foundation of Philippine-US relations. The VFA was essential to the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) between the two countries. The EDCA was supposed to be the legal basis for the rotational deployment of American military forces in different parts of the Philippines. This promise of a regular American military presence and the deterrent it constituted to more aggressive Chinese encroachments in the West Philippine Sea provided teeth to the Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) between the Philippines and the US. The damage that the abrogation of



the VFA would have wrought on the bilateral relations could have been irreparable, with both material and symbolic ramifications for the US strategic position in the Western Pacific. In July 2021, however, President Duterte recalled the abrogation of the VFA, citing as his principal reason the promise and provision of Pfizer vaccines by the United States. He even contemplated going to the US to personally thank President Joseph Biden for the vaccines.

The withdrawal of the abrogation of the VFA became a switch that seemed to signal a restoration of the geopolitical positioning of the Philippines. The Philippine government became much more vocal in speaking against China's activities in the West Philippine Sea. According to the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA), 153 notes verbale had been sent to China in 2021. This constituted 70% of the diplomatic protests issued by the Philippines to China in the last five years, i.e. during the Duterte Administration. The Philippine Coast Guard has also been more active in sending out patrols in the West Philippine Sea, leading to a rise in the "radio challenges, sounding of sirens, and blowing of horns by Chinese government vessels against Philippine authorities" which the DFA also noted it had protested. At the same time, there were more constant contacts and engagements between the armed forces of the two countries, with joint exercises restored albeit at a lower scale in recognition of the threat posed by COVID-19.

This restoration of the long-standing strategic relations between the Philippines and the US, however, is not just about US commitments to the Philippines. Beyond the West Philippine Sea is the clear threat posed by the possibility of conflict between China and the United States



7 June 2021. Chongqing, China. Philippines Foreign Minister Teodoro Locsin Jr. with his counterpart Wang Yi. Credit: Chinese foreign ministry.

over Taiwan. Brendan Taylor has noted that the issue of Taiwan is potentially the most likely to be the reason for actual conflict to break out between the US and China. China's aggressive provocations of sending warplanes into Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) and the increasing frequency of these provocations has pushed the US into affirming its commitment to defend Taiwan against an invasion from China.

President Duterte himself has not been at the forefront of this "rebalancing" of the Philippines strategic alignment. By and large, this has been left to Secretaries Teodoro Locsin, Jr. and Delfin Lorenzana of the DFA and the Department of National Defense (DND), respectively. With the unveiling of the three-way strategic alliance between Australia, the UK and the US to cooperate on the security of the Indo-Pacific region, Secretary Locsin noted that it would be significant in redressing the "military imbalance" that favoured China in the region. Given the vocal opposition of China to what has become known as AUKUS, this statement seemed to confirm the realignment of the Philippines' geopolitical position. President Duterte, however, warned about how AUKUS could possibly trigger a "nuclear arms race."

This warning was a theme that he echoed at the 38th and 39th ASEAN Summits held virtually in October 2021. He noted that AUKUS could impact regional security significantly. He called on Australia, the UK and the US to ensure that the AUKUS should "complement and not complicate" cooperation in the region, and that its objectives should converge with those of ASEAN and should uphold ASEAN centrality in the evolving regional security architecture. These positions were

consistent with the cautionary statements that had been made by the leaders of Indonesia and Malaysia about AUKUS. Aligning himself with other leaders in the region and taking a decidedly ASEAN tack to regional security was somewhat strange coming from someone who in the last five years had given so little attention to ASEAN. Even when the Philippines was the ASEAN chair during its 50th anniversary, Duterte had taken on a very low profile in being host. ASEAN has never been a platform that Duterte has taken seriously. He had always been selective on what ASEAN meetings he participates in. Nonetheless, his strident defence of the need to stand by Myanmar in its search for a peaceful resolution to its internal crisis and his call for ASEAN to stay united in the pursuit of peace, stability, and prosperity represents a recognition of the dangers posed by the intensifying competition between the United States and China. AUKUS is merely one more indication of how the course and consequence of this rivalry makes it even more urgent for ASEAN to remain united, if not as a buffer then as a power-broker.

In this context, the fact that it is Duterte saying this is less important than it is being said. That ASEAN has an important role to play in keeping the region from sliding into an arena where great power relations drive the regional dynamic is something that must be asserted. That ASEAN's capacity to play this role has been diminished by the effects of the pandemic and the increasing impact of the competitive relationship between the US and China has to be recognised, and steps need to be taken to reverse this situation. Whether Duterte is serious about his concerns regarding ASEAN and the need to affirm its central role in the regional security architecture is less important than the fact that, to the Philippines,

ASEAN represents a potentially braking influence over the region's slide into what Graham Allison has called the Thucydides Trap.

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## How has Vietnam Assessed the Non-Traditional Security Agenda since COVID-19?

**Chu Minh Thao**

The COVID-19 pandemic has cast shadows over the lives of billions of people in the world. By 7 November 2021, COVID-19 had infected 250 million people worldwide, with the global death toll exceeding 5 million. In Vietnam, to date, the Delta variant triggered a fourth wave of the pandemic in April 2021 which has already resulted in more than 1 million cases and 22 thousand deaths.

This situation has raised some important questions. Should COVID-19 cause an alert among Vietnamese policy makers and invite

them to assign a more prominent rank to non-traditional security issues on the national agenda? How can Vietnam cope with the distinctive nature of these non-traditional challenges?

### Non-traditional security among the top priorities on the national agenda

Stepping into the third decade of the 21st century, in early 2021, the XIII National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) offered a new perspective on national security in the period ahead. The leaders officially emphasise the importance of non-traditional security issues in general, and social security and human security in particular, for the first time in the official record of the 13th National Party Congress. Although these non-traditional security issues have been dealt with by the government for a long time, the new priority assigned to them reflected a systematic and comprehensive

view of the full traditional and non-traditional security agenda. This demonstrated the determination of the CPV to handle the non-traditional security issues as part of the process of national development in the coming years. This new perspective enriches the current National Security Strategy as well as the National Security Law which mainly provides for military security and political security. It is expected that the non-traditional security agenda will be considered an important part of the future national security strategy and law.

The reason behind this change is that the COVID-19 experience made leaders acutely aware that non-traditional security challenges could have a profound impact. COVID-19 has quickly spread worldwide leading to infections on a massive scale and a significant death toll, declining economic well-being and quality of life for the people of most countries in the world and in Vietnam in particular.



29 July 2021. Senior ASEAN officials met to prepare for the 54th ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting. Credit: VOV.



It's expected that COVID-19 and its variants could continue to produce negative impacts over several decades. This experience and expectation made it rational for the government to rank non-traditional security issues ahead of the normal or traditional security agenda. Vietnam's entire political system has strongly engaged with the mobilisation of resources to control COVID-19. Indeed, currently, the government has considered preventing and combating COVID-19, and protecting the health and lives of the people, to be its most important task, ahead even of economic development. The working agenda of the new Prime Minister since coming to power at the beginning of 2021 has consisted primarily of dealing with COVID-19.

## Vaccine diplomacy

Dealing with the fourth wave of COVID-19 from April 2021, the government accepted the new assessment that COVID may never go away and changed its policy in October from aspiring to eliminate COVID to living with COVID. This

policy change imposed an urgent task on the government, namely to accelerate the vaccination program and achieve herd immunity as soon as possible. Given that the country lacks an indigenous capacity to develop and produce vaccines, meeting the demands of a population of more than 98 million tested Vietnam's diplomatic relationships and attracted the leadership to stronger vaccine multilateralism. The thrust of Vietnam's international engagement was redirected towards ensuring access to and supplies of vaccines from COVAX and other countries. Vietnam naturally enhanced cooperation with those countries that could provide vaccines to save its people. The country's leaders travelled as far as Europe to secure vaccine supplies. Alongside these efforts, the government found it necessary to also consider a greater contribution to COVAX, a multilateral vaccine framework, and to seek improved cooperation on vaccine production and research, and vaccine-related technology transfer from selected partners.

## Women, peace and security

Challenges like COVID-19 can pose significant risks of declining legitimacy and political insecurity if the government fails to strive to protect the resilience of the economy and its capacity to recover and sustain the nation's development. Although the government has maintained its legitimacy during the COVID-19 pandemic through successful control of the virus, it also recognised that it was essential to reduce the hardship caused by the pandemic, especially among the poor and disadvantaged members of the community. Although later than some other countries, the government is now drafting an integrated strategy for socio-economic recovery, pandemic prevention and control. The government recognises, as other countries have done, that women and girls are both among the most vulnerable in a pandemic and of particular importance to the subsequent economic recovery. Given this context, the women, peace and security agenda has been strongly promoted by Vietnam's leaders. In 2020, while serving as a



Cam Ranh International Port, Vietnam. HMAS Canberra, HMAS Anzac, and HMAS Sirius alongside port for Indo-Pacific Endeavour 2021. Credit: Australian Embassy Vietnam / Facebook.



non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, Vietnam proposed a high-level meeting on the role of women in building peace. Vietnam has also cooperated with ASEAN and ASEAN partners to enhance women's engagement in peace and security. The empowerment of women has therefore emerged as an important issue in combating COVID-19 as well as for the post-pandemic economic recovery.

## Climate change

Another non-traditional security issue that has witnessed a big change in terms of leadership awareness is climate change. Vietnam's leaders have made strong commitments relating to climate change at the UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP26) in November 2021. Indeed, Vietnam has made 4 breakthrough commitments: including Net 0 by 2050; the phase out of coal-fuelled power generation by 2040, reduce methane gas emissions by 30% emission by 2030; and commitments to recover and stop deforestation by 2030. These strong commitments should be viewed against the background of Vietnam as a coal dependent country for decades. On the other hand, Vietnam is one of the countries that suffers most from the climate change consequences such as extreme weather and rising sea-levels that, in turn, affect food security, water security, and sustainable development. These strong commitments at the global level can be expected to help generate the domestic leverage needed to implement the policies directed at more sustainable economic development, green growth and green recovery. Furthermore, this move is in line with scientific advice to the effect that the root cause of COVID-19, and other infectious diseases lies in humankind's unsustainable development practices

focused more on industrialisation and less on respect for the environment. With climate change being the largest challenge demanding urgent international cooperation, it is appropriate and very much in the national interest for Vietnam to be in the frontline of this endeavour.

## COVID-19 and Cyber security

In the wake of the pandemic, people are changing their work and lifestyle, moving toward more virtual interaction, and social distancing. Accordingly, digitalisation is seen as a primary springboard out of global and regional economic stagnation and into economic recovery. Vietnam's digital economy has grown remarkably during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, cyber security in Vietnam is still inadequate due to infrastructure constraints, governance capacity limitations and general resource scarcity. According to the Global Cybersecurity Index 2020, Vietnam was ranked 25th out of 194 nations. During the pandemic, many important information systems in Vietnam have been attacked by hackers. In the first 6 months of 2021, the State's IP addresses were attacked some 4 million times. Fake news, misinformation and the like have greatly distorted public opinion, especially regarding the effectiveness or possible risks of vaccines, leading to greater hesitation to get vaccinated. Accordingly, cyber security issues have become another priority on the national agenda. Internally, Vietnam has taken concrete steps to implement a number of laws to protect cyberspace, including the Law on cyber security and the Law on cyber information security. Externally, Vietnam supports the UN-developed norms of responsible state behaviour in cyberspace. However, the country still lacks a national cyber security strategy and needs international

“Should COVID-19 cause an alert among Vietnamese policy makers and invite them to assign a more prominent rank to non-traditional security issues on the national agenda?”

cooperation, especially technical assistance, to realise these norms at the local level.

## Coping with the non-traditional security issues is being constrained by increasing competition among major powers

Coping with COVID-19 has been made more difficult by the lack of global governance capacities to handle such a critical health emergency. One of the main reasons for this deficit is competition among the major powers which inhibits collaboration at the global level to address a global challenge. The expectation that the major powers would prioritise the threat from COVID-19 and diminish their external competition turned out to be wrong in reality, with the pandemic actually intensifying their competition. Arguments over the origin of COVID-19 did not help reduce the number of deaths and even contributed to distracting global attention away from the core issues of dealing with this unprecedented disaster and onto power politics instead. These disappointing developments intensified concerns among countries in the region. On one hand, smaller countries like Vietnam have been struggling to mobilise their

limited resources to save people's lives threatened by COVID-19. On the other hand, many of them have been compelled to simultaneously implement balanced policies to avoid dependence, and maintain strategic autonomy in their relationships with major powers.

It will not be easy for Vietnam to sustain such a policy balance, even though the country seems to have done a good job so far. It is unmistakably clear in the region that China's influence has been growing very fast during the pandemic, with its vaccine diplomacy complementing increasing trade and investment. China's vaccines—readily available and affordable—have flooded into the Southeast Asia region, over 300 million doses by October 2021. The US is somewhat lagging behind with a total of 220 million doses spread over more than 100 countries and economies by November 2021. As ASEAN and China have become each other's largest trade partner, it is expected that China's investment in the region will continue to grow, even relative to the surge of 52.1 percent year-on-year in 2020. Despite being initially slow with its COVID-19 vaccination program, Vietnam is currently accelerating this effort and looking for help from all possible sources, including China's vaccines. The motto from the doctors – which is that “the best vaccine is the one which is shot first” – aims to reduce discrimination among people regarding types of vaccines due to their concerns about the quality of China's vaccine. In the period ahead, Vietnam will need to work out in more detail how to implement its delicate balancing policy given China's rising influence in the region.

## Myanmar issues

Concentrating on COVID-19 doesn't prevent Vietnam, together with other ASEAN countries from seeking to also help the people in Myanmar to cope with the pandemic. ASEAN has made great efforts to provide humanitarian assistance to Myanmar and also called upon the international community to complement ASEAN's efforts. Though having been criticised for being slow to respond to the disconcerting situation in Myanmar, ASEAN countries have worked out a five-point consensus on Myanmar to guide ASEAN's continued engagement with the country. This spirit was demonstrated clearly and firmly with the ASEAN Summit proceeding in October 2021 without Myanmar's top general. Thus, ASEAN countries stand together with the Myanmar people, in the ASEAN spirit of wishing to stop violence and promote an environment for dialogue and mediation.

For the first time ever in its history, Vietnam is coping with the rise of non-traditional security issues in a most unexpected way. A virus that can be found only through a microscope has become an unseen enemy, causing massive and ongoing damage on a global scale. The COVID-19 pandemic together with other non-traditional security issues such as climate change, and cyber security are shadowing the security context not only in Vietnam but also in the world. Whether or not the country and the international community can cope with such a situation will depend on global cooperation and prioritisation of strategic, political and security objectives to manage the burgeoning non-traditional security challenges, starting first with the COVID-19 pandemic.

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# New Zealand: Searching for a Strategy

Natasha Hamilton-Hart

New Zealand's perception of the regional security outlook over 2021 encompassed complex, if not contradictory, understandings of the strategic environment. A heightened recognition that the country faces a more challenging security outlook was clear. On the other hand, the political leadership remained determinedly positive-sum in its public statements, unwilling to elevate its strategic alignment with traditional partners in ways that would signal decisive change. Political leaders took pains to emphasise the commitment to cooperation on an inclusive basis. Military personnel continued active engagement with both collective security arrangements through the United Nations and with traditional partners. Amid a debate over whether New Zealand should more decisively stand on one side of the growing US-China rift, the official line remained that the country pursues its foreign and security policy independently, on the basis of its own assessment of interests and values.

Geo-strategic competition between the United States and China remained the backdrop for New Zealand's foreign and security policy in 2021. As expected, the change in administration in the US did not materially affect the trajectory of rising suspicion, strategic competition and techno-nationalism between the two countries. The more challenging strategic environment was recognized in high-profile statements by both the Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister. As noted by the Foreign Minister in April, 'Global competition is intensifying, the international rules-based system is under pressure, and protectionism is



26 January 2021. NZ Trade Minister Damien O'Connor and China's Commerce Minister Wang Wentao sign the upgraded free trade deal. Credit: SMH.

on the rise.' Other official statements carried warnings of the potential for rough seas ahead. Potential threats to maritime security, including militarisation of the South China Sea, were raised as a particular concern.

The change in government that took place after New Zealand's October 2020 election brought a new foreign and security policy team to the fore. In the previous Labour-led government from 2017, the portfolios of foreign affairs and defence had been held by its alliance partners, who suffered the dramatic loss of all parliamentary seats in the election. From the end of 2020, the portfolios passed to Labour Party ministers who simultaneously held portfolios focused on domestic issues, including health and local government. Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, now commanding an outright Labour Party majority in government, consequently took a more visible role in articulating her government's strategic outlook.

Despite the demands of managing the response to the COVID-19 pandemic and New Zealand's role as host of an entirely-virtual APEC, Prime Minister Ardern gave a number of high profile foreign policy speeches that dealt with security issues. To an extent, these speeches conveyed a high-level continuity in security outlook, recognising a more turbulent strategic

environment and acknowledging differences with China. The Prime Minister's speech to a China-focused business audience in May, while speaking warmly of the importance of the relationship and many shared interests, also raised the issue of the two countries' divergent perspectives on some issues, pointing out that 'some differences challenge New Zealand's interests and values... Managing the relationship is not always going to be easy and there can be no guarantees.' The challenging regional environment was again placed front and centre in a speech in July, when the Prime Minister set out the view that, 'We have entered an era of formidable environmental, health, and geopolitical difficulties.' She pointed out that New

“Explicit discussion of security-related issues at trade and business events over the year was unprecedented, a marked change from the China-optimism of the preceding decade.”

Zealand's nearest and highest-priority region, the (South) Pacific, 'is an increasingly contested region.'

Local media gave attention to Chinese trade retaliation against Australia, and aired debate over whether this sent a warning to New Zealand. Some, particularly voices associated with the business community, were quick to draw the conclusion that New Zealand should take care not to offend its largest export market. The Trade Minister made an unfortunate diplomatic foray early in 2021, with unsolicited advice to Australia that it should be more respectful of China. However, a later speech by the Prime Minister implicitly urged exporters to consider diversification of their export markets. Explicit discussion of security-related issues at trade and business events over the year was unprecedented, a marked change from the China-optimism of the preceding decade.

In this environment, there were some signals that New Zealand does lean to one side in the US-China conflict. In November 2020, New Zealand joined with its "Five Eyes" partners in issuing a statement of concern regarding China's actions in Hong Kong. The foreign ministry maintained its earlier adoption of the term "Indo-Pacific",

which began to replace "Asia-Pacific" in speeches and statements from around 2018. Although never explicit, some commentators saw this as intended to signal support for moves by the US to entrench an "Indo-Pacific" outlook, force posture and architecture, including the "Quad" security dialogue group of US, Japan, Australia and India as part of its "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" strategy. New Zealand's support for an "Indo-Pacific" architecture of some sort was expressly made in a major foreign policy speech by the Prime Minister in July. She declared then that 'We have embraced the concept of an Indo-Pacific as the wider home for New Zealand' and welcomed opportunities to cooperate with traditional security partners, with whom New Zealand shares values.

New Zealand broke new ground in issuing a formal diplomatic note to the United Nations Secretary-General in August 2021, affirming principles of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea in relation to the South China Sea. Although not mentioning China, the note effectively took issue with Chinese statements and actions in the South China Sea. The note reaffirms commitment to principles of the UNCLOS, including the binding nature of the 2016 arbitral decision on

the dispute between the Philippines and China, and freedom of navigation. The New Zealand statement also made it clear that claims based on historical rights do not have merit, and continental countries cannot assert archipelagic rights. It is noteworthy that the statement came a few months after China's public criticism of a joint statement on the South China Sea by the Prime Ministers of Australia and New Zealand.

On the other hand, official statements and actions underlined New Zealand's refusal to contemplate open alignment against China. Not only did repeated statements call for inclusive cooperation to manage common security, economic and pandemic-related concerns, there were several other indicators that New Zealand would not necessarily stand with its only ally, Australia, or its traditional security partners.

Early in 2021, the Foreign Minister noted that she did not wish to see the "Five Eyes" grouping move beyond its traditional intelligence-sharing function. There were clear limits to how far New Zealand would pursue its human rights concerns. As news reports of abuses in China's Xinjiang Province and further crackdowns in Hong Kong gained attention, New Zealand's political leaders signalled that they would speak out in defence of the country's values and that we could expect 'differences' with China, given the two countries' different 'histories, worldviews and political and legal systems'. At the same time, these statements seemed designed to remain in the realm of diplomatic speech. The Prime Minister insisted that New Zealand speaking out in consistent, diplomatic ways when differences of value arose 'need not derail our relationship, it is simply a reality.' In other words, New Zealand would say its piece and continue business as usual. There would be no automatic trade sanctions targeting



11 November 2021. Auckland, New Zealand. The immersive and interactive, New Zealand-themed stage design for the APEC CEO Summit. Credit: APEC.



human rights abusers, no restraints on trade on human rights grounds, and no publicly-articulated moves to ensure technology supply chains are insulated from potential fall-out from growing “tech war” tensions between the US and China. New Zealand concluded an upgrade to its bilateral trade agreement with China in early 2021.

The Prime Minister’s embrace of the “Indo-Pacific” was expressly conditional on any Indo-Pacific architecture not only remaining committed to upholding the rules-based international order, but also openness and inclusivity. She pointedly noted that, ‘the principles of openness and inclusivity are especially key for New Zealand. Often language and geographic “frames” are used as subtext, or a tool to exclude some nations from dialogue. Our success will depend on working with the widest possible set of partners.’ While recognising geo-strategic turbulence, the overall tenor of the speech emphasised the positive-sum challenges of dealing with the pandemic, climate change, maintaining economic growth and an open, rules-based trading system.

This positive-sum outlook is consistent with the views of New Zealand’s new Foreign Minister, which markedly diverge from those of her predecessor. In a heavily metaphor-laden speech on the New Zealand-China relationship in April, the Foreign Minister likened the relationship between the two countries to that between a ‘dragon and taniwha’ – the taniwha being a dragon-like creature in Māori mythology. Although the speech did not shy away from the ‘values that differentiate’ New Zealand and China, it was more notable for consolidating her previously-announced shift to a foreign policy based on an indigenous Māori perspective. In the minister’s presentation, this is a perspective that appears to exclude the possibility that foreign and security policy is embedded in a landscape of strategic

competition, or an international system in which there are no guarantees of sovereignty or rules beyond those that states can fashion and choose to adhere to. There is no sense of power-based competition or relative gains in this approach. Rather, the articulation is of a foreign policy based on respect, kindness, an emphasis on collective values and interests, and a concern for inter-generational wellbeing. Invoking parallels with Treaty of Waitangi-based domestic policy settings, the foreign minister described a foreign policy oriented to the pursuit of justice and the righting of wrongs, in a way that is ‘patient, pluralistic and accommodating of the views of both the weak and the strong.’

This outlook sits uneasily with the most significant new development in New Zealand’s security environment, which came in September 2021 with the announcement that three traditional security partners, the US, the U.K. and Australia, would form the AUKUS security partnership. New Zealand’s distance from its partners was made very clear. New Zealand was not invited to join the arrangement and the official line was that we would not have expected to be included. The planned acquisition of a nuclear-powered submarine capability by Australia, the primary purpose of the AUKUS agreement, will create future dilemmas for New Zealand, given anti-nuclear legislation that prohibits nuclear-powered, as well as nuclear-armed, vessels from its waters.

Officially, nothing has changed in New Zealand’s stance. It remains an independent but active member of the international community, playing a role in numerous collective and cooperative security operations. Over the year, New Zealand Defence Force personnel and assets deployed in Korea, in support of upholding UN sanctions against North Korea; to the Middle East, where the navy took a leading role in multilateral anti-

narcotics action; in the evacuation of forces from Afghanistan, where NZDF personnel had been deployed over nearly two decades; and on humanitarian missions in the South Pacific, where the NZDF delivered pandemic-related supplies and vaccines. In October, the NZDF took part in the FPDA (Five Power Defence Arrangements) Bersama Gold 21 exercise in Southeast Asia. The Chief of Defence Force also made visits to counterparts in Europe over September and October. Although these visits did not attract public attention, the fact that they took place at all, given tight restrictions on travel, signalled a commitment to remain engaged internationally.

Overall, New Zealand’s actions and statements suggest a desire, at least at the political level, for continuity in security stance. New Zealand’s official security outlook, in the form of its Defence Assessment of 2018 and a 2019 update focusing on partnerships in the South Pacific, has not been publicly updated. The Minister of Defence, new to his portfolio after the 2020 election, has made no major speech or statement on security or defence-related issues. Most press releases from the defence minister relate to his other portfolio responsibilities. There has been no renewal at the most senior levels of the military, with the Chief of Defence Force and all heads of service having their appointments extended beyond the usual 3-year term. Decisions around defence capability, particularly the issue of what will replace the ANZAC frigates, have not been announced. Defence and security policy largely remains on settings established in 2018, by ministers in the previous government. The world – and New Zealand’s security partners – are moving at a different pace.

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# Myanmar: A Tale of Two Governments

Arthur Swan Ye Tun

The views of the security community in Myanmar in 2021 are difficult to put into words. The primary reason for this difficulty is that, since the coup in February 2021, the institution of Government has split into two - the members and supporters, respectively, the coup forces of the State Administration Council (SAC) and of the ousted National Unity Government (NUG). Both sides seek to completely dominate the other and as of mid-October 2021 there seemed little prospect of a resolution without further bloodshed.

With such concerns being the priority, it is hard to detect the underlying security outlook held by either side. At the same time, however, the attitudes derived from Myanmar's geographical position and which have shaped its foreign policy settings historically have been remarkably stable despite dramatic changes in the distribution of power globally as well as in Myanmar's more immediate region.

There is a paradox regarding Myanmar's place in the world of geopolitical strategy. On one hand, with the country's wealth in natural resources and strategic location between two of the world's largest nations—namely India and China—as well as being on the edge of Southeast Asia, has placed it in something of a spotlight. On the other hand, these same key characteristics also inhibit Myanmar's neighbours and other concerned parties from attempting to create any major changes in the country as this could be expected to attract the attention of the said major power neighbours and turn Myanmar into a key battleground. It is because of this reality that many of Myanmar's neighbours and other international



24 April 2021. ASEAN leaders meet for the bloc's special summit on the Myanmar crisis in Jakarta. Credit: ASEAN Secretariat / Flickr.

powers are basically content with the external policy settings of Myanmar's military rulers, despite the international outrage at their abuse of power domestically.

Despite its image of brutality and aggression, the Tatmadaw leaders' policy instincts are fundamentally driven by internal considerations. These leaders prioritise internal security and domestic unity out of an obsessive concern about attracting foreign intervention of any kind. This mentality stems from the Burmese trauma with British rule that began with the First Anglo-Burmese War, where the imperial expansions of the Konbaung Dynasty ended up clashing with the rising British Indian Empire and ultimately leading to the full conquest of the Burmese kingdom. Since Burma gained its independence on 4th January 1948, it is almost a universal mindset among the leadership of both the democratic and later the military governments that Burma will remain neutral in the Cold War, becoming a member of the Non-Aligned Movement in 1961. Foreign involvement of any kind has been looked at with suspicion and fear. This changed in the 1980s once the People's Republic of China had withdrawn its support for the Communist Party of Burma. The second junta under General Than Shwe and the State

Peace and Development Council (SPDC), which was facing widespread international condemnation, opened its doors to the PRC around 1989.

Since Myanmar's military succeeded in pushing most of the ethnic armed organisations to the boundaries, border issues with its neighbours have been a key issue for Myanmar. Fighting at the borders has occasionally led to civilians in neighbouring countries being caught in the crossfire. In 2015, Chinese civilians were caught in Myanmar artillery strikes targeted at Kokang rebels. However, despite the importance of protecting positive relations with the PRC, even the SPDC leadership was keen to stay on a low profile internationally. An example of this is in the way the SPDC dealt with border and international incidents with its neighbours. The Rakhine Crisis that gained global attention in 2017 was seen in the states most directly concerned—Myanmar and Bangladesh—as an aggregation of refugee and settlement problems stemming from the British partition of India in 1947, the independence of Burma in 1948 and the Bangladesh War of Independence in 1971. This common perspective had facilitated the prolonged 'under the table' management of these issues between Myanmar and East Pakistan/Bangladesh. Similar dealings were



conducted with Thailand, China and India.

In 2015, under the civilian coalition government, there was a nation-wide ceasefire, the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) between the government forces and the various ethnic armed organisations (EAOs). This ceasefire was extended by the National League of Democracy (NLD).

Since its independence, Myanmar has been fighting insurgencies in one form or another. The earliest insurgencies stemmed from the bumpy process of independence for Burma. British Indian colonial policy of ethnic discrimination against the Bama majority led to a highly nationalistic Bama Buddhist movement dominating Burmese politics immediately after independence which, in turn, led to the gradual alienation of many of the country's ethnic minorities. The civil war of 1948-62, though popularly portrayed as a Bama government versus minorities conflict, was more of a great free for all between the government, communist and various different minorities, with the non-government actors often fighting each other.

The chaos of the fighting and the autonomy of the military during this time led to the independence of the armed forces and their disillusionment with the civilian leadership. From the 1962 coup to 1988, the officer corps evolved into the military junta, a highly politicised military leadership group backed with military training and resources.

The nation-wide ceasefire confined direct security concerns primarily to criminal elements in the golden triangle in Myanmar's Shan State and to the newly reopened Rakhine conflict. The latter conflict was prompted primarily by the 24 August 2017 attacks by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) on 24 police outposts in the state. The subsequent

fallout and mass clearance operations resulted in over 700,000 refugees fleeing to Bangladesh. Despite this formidable consequence, clashes between ARSA and the Tatmadaw forces have since been negligible, although contact between Islamic State (IS) and members of the Rohingya community have led to fears of potential radicalisation within the refugee community.

It was another story, however, in respect of the Arakan Army (AA), a force formed in 2009. Following the sectarian clashes in Rakhine state and, particularly, the international community's strong focus on the Rohingya Muslims and apathy towards the ethnic Rakhine Buddhist majority, coupled with the inefficiency of the new civilian government's approach toward the issue, led to intensifying support for AA. With their newfound support, the AA led a swift and brutal campaign against the security forces, proving to be a serious challenge for them. Unlike the relatively conventional forces of the other EAOs, the AA forces often fought in civilian clothes and were able to conduct fast hit and run strikes against the Tatmadaw forces.

The NCA process has, perhaps inevitably, exposed Myanmar's difficult civil-military relationships, not just within the government but also amongst the EAOs. The process was notably complicated by the enmity between the newly elected NLD government and the leaders of the Tatmadaw as much as by the historical enmity between the EAOs. However, according to a NLD official who worked with the NCA, military leaders feared any success the NLD may make with ending the conflict as it would put them in a highly negative light. Indeed, during the consolidation of the NCA, military forces would continue to conduct operations against the EAOs, who grew wary of the entire process.

Since the February 2021 coup, the security situation has changed

“Since Burma gained its independence on 4th January 1948, it is almost a universal mindset among the leadership of both the democratic and later the military governments that Burma will remain neutral in the Cold War, becoming a member of the Non-Aligned Movement in 1961.”

completely. The intensification of the conflict between the SAC forces and their opponents have changed the security dynamics in several ways.

The SAC's primary concern has been and remains the complete security of their power take over. In the light of the popular protest against them, the SAC's second key focus has been legitimacy and its actions domestically and internationally would have been shaped to achieve that aim. The leaders of the Myanmar military define legitimacy as the cessation of all anti-SAC resistance. Because they have been involved in politics since the independence of the country, it is easy to forget the nature of Myanmar's military officers. In contrast to the politicians in uniform that dominate governance in many other countries, the Tatmadaw officers are ultimately war fighters who want to play politics. As historian Mary Callahan observed in her book *Making Enemies*, the Tatmadaw leaders are amateurs at

politics and cannot be expected to become true players in that arena. Instead, they rely on their skills with arms and tactics and simple military-style diplomacy. Until their capacity to engage in combat, even urban warfare, is completely removed, it is unlikely the SAC will take any other course of action.

The NUG's goal, on the other hand, is to further the NLD led coalition and to end the domination of the military in Burmese politics once and for all. The taste of political freedom and economic progress over the last decade has ended tolerance of any form of compromise that would return Myanmar to the days of military domination.

The largest EAOs, namely the Kachin Independence Army and the Karen National Union condemned the coup leaders of the SAC and reopened the battlefronts. Furthermore, the brutal crackdown on the massed protests, particularly the 27th March killings, have led to the formation of the People's Defence Force (PDF), an armed wing of the ousted government calling itself the National Unity Government (NUG). The PDF, made up both conventional units trained by supporting EAOs and independent local cells, have expanded the conflict beyond its initial confines to Myanmar's border regions as well some urban centres. More importantly, the rise of the PDF has drawn the conflict in Myanmar away from ethnic lenses. There are now significant numbers of ethnic Bamas, who are taking up arms against the junta which has always portrayed itself as the defender of Bama nationalism.

Furthermore, the Tatmadaw security forces have experienced resistance from within, including mass defections. The most high profile of these was the SAC's arrest of Brigadier-General Phyo Thant, in charge of Northwest Command, for an attempted defection. Some 1,500 soldiers and hundreds



24 April 2021. Myanmar junta leader Min Aung Hlaing arrives in Jakarta for the ASEAN leaders' meeting. Credit: BPMI Setpres.

of police officers have since deserted or defected. The most noteworthy of these groups is a formation of defected Tatmadaw officers and soldiers known only as the Zero Army.

While violent confrontations between the forces still loyal to the SAC and those opposing them still occur, the new situation has led to an easing of other conflicts. Of particular note is that the close cooperation between PDF groups and EAOs, especially the KNU, KIA and the Chin National Army (CNA) has contributed to an easing of ties between the Bama majority and the minorities.

Coping with the Covid-19 pandemic in the midst of the conflict with the SAC has also strengthened local ties. As the struggle against COVID suggested a focus on a common enemy, local community leaders began to form local ties. During a fire in the Muslim neighbourhood in Mandalay, local Buddhist monks organised a relief effort for the victims. Rohingya Muslim students have raised money through other networks to help displaced Buddhist communities in the Rakhine State.

The universal suffering resulting from both the military government's efforts to consolidate its authority and the SAC's mismanagement of the

COVID-19 pandemic have provided the sense of a common struggle and a common enemy and served as a platform for greater reconciliation between Myanmar's diverse and conflicting communities. While nearly half a century of enmity will take more effort to resolve, the positive changes in sectarian and religious relations are unprecedented, particularly between groups that have recent experience of violent confrontation.

With the COVID-19 pandemic still ongoing and political violence expected to rise with both sides mobilising their forces for major offensives, much of the public mindset is geared for simple survival. Volunteer Watchmen have been formed locally to protect their neighbourhoods against potential looters and criminal elements, who may attempt to take advantage of the situation. Families have stockpiled essential supplies.

As the SAC becomes more desperate and the fires of rebellion spread more widely among the population, the only thing truly certain is that whatever comes next will change Myanmar forever.

**Arthur Swan Ye Tun**

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# Cambodia's Security Outlook

Deth Sok Udom



6 August 2021. Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation Prak Sokhonn attends the 28th ASEAN regional forum. Credit: Foreign Ministry.

Until February 2021, Cambodia was considered one of the most successful countries in the world in fighting against the COVID-19 pandemic as there had been only small community outbreaks and no death toll. Nonetheless, the country's economy was affected by the global economic impact of COVID as the tourism, export and construction sectors all took a hit. With the wider community outbreak in late February 2021, the economic situation turned for the worst and the capital city had to be placed under lockdown in mid-April. The pandemic became the dominating non-traditional security challenge for the country, so much so that the Ministry of Defense of Cambodia had to devote considerable resources to helping the government fight the outbreak, including inoculation and database registration, provision of vaccine cards, facilitating vaccine donations, and providing personnel for logistic support. As of early November 2021, based on official statistics, Cambodia has had close to 120,000 infected cases and at least 2,800 deaths. On

the bright side, by early November, Cambodia had vaccinated over 85 percent of the entire population of 16 million people (including children aged five and above) – thereby surpassing Singapore as the most vaccinated country in Southeast Asia and one of the most inoculated countries in the world. Accordingly, Prime Minister Hun Sen ordered all domestic sectors to be reopened by November 01, and is set to progressively ease international travel restrictions in the near future.

Besides the socio-economic factors, the COVID-19 pandemic has also had foreign policy implications for Cambodia. In his concerted effort to inoculate the entire population of Cambodia, Prime Minister Hun Sen has relied mainly on vaccine donations from a number of sources and purchases from major partner countries, particularly China which remains the main provider. While acknowledging and welcoming donations from all countries, the Cambodian premier proudly speaks of what Chinese President Xi Jinping referred to as “ironclad friendship”

between China and Cambodia. Cambodia also continues to urge ASEAN and China to make “concerted efforts to turn the 2030 joint vision into actual implementation for the effectiveness of our strategic partnership and shared future.” Hun Sen has on multiple occasions asked somewhat rhetorically, “if I don't rely on China, who will I rely on?” Therefore, Cambodia's relations with China can be expected to be as close as it could be, despite criticisms—both local and external—that Cambodia is too aligned with and too reliant on China.

On the other hand, since the dissolution of Cambodia's main opposition party in late 2017, US-Cambodia relations have experienced ebbs and flows. In July 2021, for instance, the US House of Representatives passed the “Cambodia Democracy Act of 2021” which stipulates that: “this bill directs the President to impose sanctions on individuals responsible for acts to undermine democracy in Cambodia, including acts that constituted serious human rights violations.” More importantly, the United States has frequently raised concerns about what it believes is the ongoing construction by China of a naval base in Ream in the south-western Sihanoukville province—an allegation that the Cambodian government has consistently denied. Following a visit by the US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman to Cambodia in early June 2021 and responding to her remark that the United States has “serious concerns” about China's “military presence” at Ream, the Cambodian government agreed to host a visit by a US defence attaché to the base. This visit was cut short—according to the US embassy

“The unprecedented and unfortunate failure by ASEAN under Cambodia’s chairmanship in 2012 to issue a joint statement on the South China Sea conflict has continued to haunt Cambodia’s image as a neutral country in the eyes of some countries.”

in Phnom Penh—as the “Cambodian military officials refused to allow the defence attaché full access to the naval base”. Cambodian government’s spokesperson Phay Siphon was quoted in the local media as saying that Cambodia had “nothing to hide,” although some parts of the base were off-limits on national security grounds, just as “The US itself never allows anyone” unrestricted access to its bases. As recently as October 2021, the CSIS released another report alleging continuation of the naval base construction by China, which the Cambodian government again denied, stating that Cambodia is capable of developing the Ream base on its own and does not allow any foreign country to have military facilities on its sovereign territory. So long as the lack of trust and the cycle of accusation and denial persists, US-Cambodia relations can be expected to be somewhat bumpy well into 2022. Nonetheless, PM Hun Sen also praised and supported the US in its engagement with ASEAN. In the latest 38th and 39th ASEAN

summits in late October, he praised the US initiative to establish the minimum goal of vaccinations for 70 per cent of the world’s population, and expressed his “deep gratitude to the US for their donations of vaccines, medical equipment and grant aid to Cambodia,” as well as requesting that “the US continue to provide all necessary support to ASEAN in the fight against COVID-19.” This balanced approach will help maintain relations between the two countries despite the challenge of lingering disagreements.

Apart from the US, the other partners of the so-called Quad countries (namely, Japan, Australia, and India) are expected to maintain good ties with Cambodia, despite their perceived stance vis-a-vis China. While sharing similar democratic values and security outlooks with the US, these three countries have hitherto maintained close economic and diplomatic ties with Cambodia by only expressing concerns moderately and non-confrontationally insofar as Cambodia’s democratic progress is concerned. It is anticipated that these states will stick with this approach over the foreseeable future.

Closer to home, relations between Cambodia and its neighbours—Thailand, Laos and Vietnam—can be expected to remain relatively stable and cooperative into 2022. Despite occasional disagreements and incidents in the recent past (especially relating to border disputes), Cambodia is working closely with these countries on post-COVID recovery. For instance, Cambodia is considering cooperating with Thailand on implementing a mutual quarantine-free policy and facilitating the inoculation by Cambodian authorities of Cambodian migrant workers currently based in Thailand. In addition, the two countries are set to resume talks on the Overlapping Claims Area (OCA) in the Gulf of Thailand which were

disrupted by the change in Thai leadership in 2006 and especially when relations between the two countries descended into conflict in 2008-11. In late September, the leaders of Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam met in Hanoi and reaffirmed solidarity and friendship among the three parties and countries. In fact, Cambodia has already donated 200,000 doses of the Sinovac vaccine to Vietnam to help the country fight the pandemic. Whatever the longer term consequences of Cambodia’s increasingly close ties with China for Cambodia-Vietnam relations, Cambodia can be expected to sustain a close friendship with both communist states over the foreseeable future.

On the wider diplomatic front, the Cambodian government continues to advocate and, where possible, demonstrate its support for multilateralism and the international rule of law amidst the rising tension between the US and China. As co-chair of the Asian-Europe Meeting (ASEM), for instance, Cambodia has continuously called for cooperation between Europe and ASEAN to uphold mutual respect and strengthen multilateral institutions and the peaceful resolution of disputes. Conversely, Cambodia has expressed concerns (particularly to Australia) about the establishment of the AUKUS partnership, hoping that this quasi alliance would not provoke an arms race in the Pacific region.

As Cambodia will serve as Chair of ASEAN in 2022, the country will bear major responsibility for addressing several unresolved problems and to lead the regional association through the challenges and uncertainties of the escalating US-China geopolitical rivalry.

Firstly, as ASEAN Chair, Cambodia will have to polish its image as a neutral country and not merely a client-state of China





25 June 2021. Minister of National Defence Tea Banh meets his Japanese counterpart Nobuo Kishi. Credit: Tea Banh / Facebook.

as it is occasionally portrayed in the international media. The unprecedented and unfortunate failure by ASEAN under Cambodia's chairmanship in 2012 to issue a joint statement on the South China Sea conflict has continued to haunt Cambodia's image as a neutral country in the eyes of some countries. It would be a challenging task but one that would be greatly facilitated if China and ASEAN countries can successfully sign the Code of Conduct (COC) on the South China Sea. The conclusion of the COC, however, is unlikely in the near future. It will inevitably remain a thorny issue within the bloc because of the different interests among the claimant and non-claimant ASEAN member states in the conflict. On a more positive note, Cambodia can be expected to use its experience and clout as ASEAN Chair to urge the rest of ASEAN to accept Timor Leste as the eleventh member of the regional bloc.

Second, Cambodia will have to lead ASEAN in dealing with the junta in Myanmar as the member states of the association have to tackle the conundrum between adhering to its non-interference principle on the one hand and enhancing its vision of becoming a peaceful political community on the other. Most

recently, the leaders of ASEAN have taken the commendable step of not inviting the junta government to the 2021 ASEAN summit as the junta leadership had failed to abide by the Five-Point consensus agreed upon by all ASEAN leaders. It remains to be seen how members of ASEAN will tackle the Myanmar debacle in the longer run should the status quo continue and how Cambodia will seek to develop a consensus on how ASEAN should approach the management of this core challenge.

An equally challenging task for Cambodia as ASEAN's chair will be protecting and consolidating ASEAN's centrality as geopolitical tensions threaten to change regional dynamics. The increasing visibility of Quad activities in the Pacific, the establishment of AUKUS, and China's frequent and sharper assertions of its sovereignty over Taiwan all confirm that the rivalry between China and the US and its allies is more than a mere rhetoric. Furthermore, President Joe Biden has broken with precedent and openly declared that the US will be at Taiwan's side in an event of a Chinese attack. In such a precarious situation, an unexpected and unintentional clash over the Strait of Taiwan or in the South China Sea could flare up and

quickly get beyond anyone's control.

Nonetheless, while the geopolitical uncertainties and the increasingly volatile situation will certainly present challenges for Cambodia as ASEAN Chair, they will be moderated not only by the collective fear of conflict but also by the common need to address the challenges of the post-COVID economic recovery as well as the increasingly urgent matter of addressing climate change and its attendant agenda of non-traditional security dilemmas. All these matters invite closer cooperation among nations to adopt retrospective policies that are conducive to tourism, investment and cross-border trade.

Given the global trend of learning to "live with COVID-19," of adopting the "new normal" way of life and expediting the post-COVID economic recovery plans, Cambodia looks to be reasonably well positioned to step into the role of ASEAN chair in 2022: it recently announced that the theme for its chairmanship will be "ASEAN A.C.T: Addressing Challenges Together."

## Dr Deth Sok Udom

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# Annex: Selected Comments on the Rules-Based Order

## What (and Whose) Rules-Based Order (RBO)?

### Bilahari Kausikan

Every 'order' by definition is 'rules based' because if there are no rules, the consequence is anarchy not order. 'RBO' is a 'Rashomon term' – after the short story by Ryunosuke Akutagawa. Its meaning depends on the perspective of the user. We may think we are communicating about the same thing – but actually we are more often than not only using the same words.

'RBO' generally means – at least to the majority, because the majority benefitted from it – the 'liberal international order' (LIO). Different states or societies, however, often place stress on one part of the LIO rather than another. Singapore (and other ASEAN members) would place much more stress on the LIO's trade-economic aspects – but would not be comfortable with some of its political-security aspects. Australia and Japan would have a more balanced emphasis on both aspects, but would not be entirely comfortable with the Trump administration's interpretation of the political-security aspects as 'hard containment' of China. Modi's India would probably agree with the Trump administration's interpretation of the political-security aspects, but would be ambivalent about the trade-economic aspects – as its 2020 refusal to join the RCEP (Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership), illustrates.

These different interpretations are furthermore not stable but situational and conditional. Australia and Japan may be more comfortable with the Biden administration's interpretation of the political-security aspects, although Japan and Australia (and some ASEAN countries) would be concerned if Biden turns out to be Obama 2.0 in its attitude towards hard power. Many of us would probably have a greater convergence of meaning when we talk about an RBO in the specific context of the South China Sea and Senkaku – because we would then mean a specific set of rules, UNCLOS (United Nations Convention for the Law of the Sea). Even then, which parts of UNCLOS we stress would probably differ – for instance, if a claimant state were

using the term rather than a non-claimant state.

These ambiguities exist even if we use RBO as a kind of short-hand term to express concerns about Chinese behaviour. There is a broad consensus across the Indo-Pacific (another Rashomon term) that certain aspects of Chinese behaviour are unacceptable, but we all would not agree about which aspects of Chinese behaviour are most egregious; Singapore, for example takes no position on the merits of the various claims in the SCS but stresses the general need for them to be settled peacefully and in accordance with international law. The US is more concerned than ASEAN about the permissibility of military activities in EEZs. Nor would we all hold our concerns with the same degree of intensity, and the concerns and their intensity would themselves change over time. In the 1990s, the US was relatively unconcerned about the various claims in the SCS and took some persuading to even state a position of principle in support of ASEAN when the dispute over Mischief Reef flared up.

China itself agrees with some aspects of an RBO particularly in the trade-economic domain, why else would it have signed up to the RCEP and express interest at the highest level in the CPTPP (Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership), an agreement which the United States originally supported? I don't think that Xi Jinping's expression of interest in the CPTPP is anything but tactical but that in itself points to the instrumental nature of our use of the term. RBO is not an autonomous reality that exists independent of our perceptions and intentions.

My instinctive (although not always articulated) response to anyone using the term RBO is to ask myself whose rules, which rules, and why are they using it? It was never very realistic to expect China to be a 'responsible stake-holder' in a LIO it had very little say in establishing.

But while China is revanchist, it is not revisionist in that as one of the principal beneficiaries of the LIO, it has no strong incentive to just kick over the table. Beijing picks and chooses which rules to comply with and which to disregard, but who does not? Who is perfectly consistent? We just make different choices about which bits of which RBO to comply with and which to disregard.

While almost everyone uses RBO to refer to one aspect or another of the LIO, the LIO is not the natural order of things. The LIO was uncontested only for a historically short and exceptional period between 1989-1991 when the Berlin Wall came down and the USSR imploded and circa 2008 when the global financial crisis broke out. We are now returning to a more historically normal period of a divided and contested international order. But this is not a 'new Cold War' which is an intellectually lazy trope. The US and USSR led two competing systems; their competition in principal was over which system would prevail. The US and China are both vital parts of a single system; their competition is over which will dominate and control that system. Total, across-the board decoupling is highly improbable. Even the BRI rests on a foundation of a selection of much the same rules. Can it (and China) succeed if the world turns protectionist?

None of the difficulties I have highlighted can be overcome by qualifying RBO with 'Liberal', 'Conservative' or 'Consensus' because the adjectives are subject to the same ambiguities and situational conditionalities as the noun. Still, no one will discard the term RBO. It is a diplomatic tool rather than a term with an exact or stable meaning. It is useful as a diplomatic tool precisely because it is ambiguous.

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# Rules-Based Order – More Than Words

**Lina A. Alexandra**

It is widely believed that certain international rules have governed the relations among states. Also, security and economic institutions – at the global and regional level – have been established both to facilitate states to pursue their interests and at the same time to set out boundaries to preserve global stability and welfare. This cluster of laws, rules and guidelines – wherever they may be recorded or embedded – collectively constitute the so-called ‘Rules Based Order’. In the last decade or so, however, the sharpening tension between status quo and emerging major powers – exemplified in the United States-China relations – has provoked some reflections over the sustainability of the Rules Based Order (RBO). It is helpful to revisit the RBO by exploring three questions – focusing 1) on differences in views toward the concept, 2) on potential areas where the RBO might be amended, and 3) on whether some RBO-related terms are useful to explain it better.

## Differences in defining RBO

It is generally accepted that there is no single, uniform definition of the RBO. Nevertheless, extrapolating from the application of these terms in the domestic context, ‘rules’ is understood broadly as a set of broad governing principles accepted by states to shape their conduct. Amitav Acharya has classified definitions of order into two groups: descriptive/situational and normative. The descriptive/situational treats order in terms of the existing political, security, and social situations that at a particular time impact on state-to-state relations. The normative deals with the ideal, desirable construction – invoking order in the sense of peaceful condition and stability.

Essentially, differences can be found in at least three dimensions of the idea of a RBO: the vision; the underpinning factors; and the possibility of change. Regarding the vision, the ideal camp envisions RBO as a public good, yielding inter-state relations that provide security, stability, and welfare for all regardless of their sizes or material powers. For this to occur, RBO ideally has to be run by a “club of states” that shares common identity/values, e.g. democracies.

On the underpinning factors, the normative side argues that for RBO to work, it is to be ideally sustained by a long-term normative processes in which certain governing principles eventually become states’ habit instead of constraining rules. It essentially criticizes the common practice of the Western counterparts where they shortcut the process by transferring domestic values into international rules and set up instruments for global policing and courts which often do not work effectively to regulate state behaviours.

Finally, the pragmatic rather views the existing RBO serving only the status quo’s interests. To a certain extent, this camp partly argues that the alleged revisionist may not actually be seeking change – because it gains benefits from the existing order. For instance, while many claim that China is challenging the RBO, it has actually relied heavily on the sovereignty principle to defend its interests vis-à-vis the Western powers. China still maintains its participation in various multilateral institutions and also emulates established practices in the way it designs its own Chinese-led multilateral mechanisms, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

## Amending RBO?

### There are two areas where RBO amendment might be pursued.

First, the legitimacy aspect. Looking at the current multipolar system, the inclusion of non-Western civilizations into reshaping the international order is inevitable. As Acharya has argued, the involvement of these non-Western states into the revisioning process will increase the RBO’s legitimacy, resulting in stronger acceptance.

Here, the emerging middle powers can take the lead as honest brokers in amending the international order. I do not refer to a particular state, but rather to a coalition of middle powers working together. Middle powers have a distinct interest in becoming “stabilisers” and

“legitimisers” of world order – and not challenging the status quo. Middle powers, although like all states in seeking to pursue their own interests, do not have the advantage of superior force and thus favour negotiation and cooperation in their quest for international stability. Their commitment to the orderliness and security in the world system makes them all the more willing to work on issues beyond their immediate interests.

The biggest challenge lies in the fact that some qualified middle powers are allies one superpower or another. Nevertheless, while being loyal to their patron, we know that at times they also strain the tolerance of their patron in defending their middle power interests. A fundamental middle power interest, of course, is to see the RBO adapt as necessary to ensure the welfare and security for all not for one major power.

A second challenge faced by middle powers is to convince both Western and non-Western states that when they talk about RBO, it is important to “walk the talk”. It is not enough to preach to others about what needs to be done. This expectation should be directed first to one’s self to set the example for others to follow.

### Are terms like ‘Liberal RBO’, ‘Conservative RBO’, and ‘Consensus RBO’ useful in describing rules and principles?

These various RBO conceptions are informative, particularly to exemplify the importance of rules in creating global order. However, they also indicate the weaknesses of the RBO. The Liberal RBO is fading, particularly since the US as its key champion has repeatedly violated the principles that sustain the order. The Conservative RBO reflects this pessimism by saying that, in reality, it is power politics rather than rules that prevail. Rules only apply when the mighty want to (mis)use them to pursue their own interests. Finally, the Consensus RBO seems to bridge between the two but underlines that consensus is still in the making and has an uncertain future.

## There are three things to do, if one is to be optimistic.

First, the superpower (and “going-to-be” superpower) needs to stop (mis)using the RBO concept simply to condemn others – or to contest which rules ought to prevail – while not really observing the existing rules.

Second, again, a coalition of middle powers should step up to take a bigger role as honest brokers to mediate the

revision of the international order. While support from major powers is necessary, the majors must, clearly, accept and believe that international order can be sustained not only by hegemony, but by cooperation amongst all actors.

Third, middle powers should continue to champion a broad multilateralism rather than asserting themselves in exclusive groupings – groupings in which it is easier for smaller powers to be torn by

the interests of major powers. It can be argued that it is everyone’s responsibility to make broad multilateralism the core habit or common norm. To get acceptance for this view will not be a quick and easy process, but it is not unfeasible to achieve it.

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## Preserving the ‘Rules-Based Order’

### Dr Bec Strating

Terms such as ‘rules-based order’ (RBO) and the ‘liberal international order’ became popular during the last decade of the twentieth century. Since the end of the Cold War, these two terms have often been used interchangeably. The collapse of the USSR, America’s rise as the global hegemon — and the romanticisation of that unprecedented phenomenon as an irreversible victory of liberalism, the unipolar moment and the end of history — led to the assumption that there is no alternative to liberalism. Furthermore, it also created a false sense of the universality of ideas and norms that were hitherto prevalent mainly in the so-called ‘free world’ as well as in some of its former colonies.

Clearly, ‘rules’ of the contemporary international order are deeply embedded in Western civilization and the ‘modern’ political philosophical principles the West propagates. These standards are not necessarily impartial, egalitarian, or universal but are still acknowledged as guiding principles of the contemporary international system. Some of the core ideas include: democracy, respect for human rights, free and open trade, responsible government, sovereign equality of nations, rule of law, and universal applicability of international law.

Lack of consensus in seeking a universally-acceptable definition of the RBO is due to the fact that it is often projected as the mirror image of the US-led Western liberal order. Both ideological and power politics equations have shaped this understanding in the non-western world. No western power, for

instance, would support a non-western, quasi-liberal, RBO that Russia might aim to establish – with the Central Asian, Caucasus, and the Balkan regions under its ambit. To some, even the Russo-Chinese regional order, being built through the SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation) is unacceptable and a threat to the RBO. Apart from these so-called revisionist states, ASEAN shows some deviations beyond the western normal. As Amitav Acharya has pointed out, convergence of authoritarian values with commitments to economic development, regime security, and political stability can form the basis of a non-western security community (and regional order). However, these issues are always a matter of debate between non-western and western powers, with the latter using them as a bargaining chip to exercise hegemonic control. In this respect, it is difficult to decipher how western powers choose some authoritarian regimes such as Saudi Arabia or Thailand over others.

Arguably, a rules-based order hinges on four key pillars. First and foremost is: a set of rules that are acceptable to member countries and applicable to potential members irrespective of their location, politico-economic capacities, and ethnic composition. Second, these rules must be backed by a range of institutions that create enabling economic and politico-security architectures which, in turn, bind the institutions together. Third, there needs to be the promise to deliver a peaceful and disciplined system that minimises the possibility of conflicts (at least among the member states). Fourth,

there has to be a legitimacy, without which no order can be sustained for long. The legitimacy issue is one of the challenges China is facing with regard to its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China’s BRI investments often fall short in terms of showcasing its normative agency. Apprehensions regarding lack of transparency, debt-trap diplomacy, environmentally and financially unsustainable investment patterns, and also regarding a China-centric trade, investment and developmental approach, have led to the BRI having a ‘credibility shortfall’.

Contrary to popular perceptions, the constituent ideas of a RBO are not of recent origin. A precursor to the idea of a RBO, for instance, is the fourteen principles set forth by Woodrow Wilson in his speech before the joint session of Congress on January 8, 1918. For one, freedom of navigation, nowadays perceived by China as the latest American ploy to contain it, was a key component of the Wilsonian principles.

To be sure, even during the Cold War era, the bipolar order was based on rules and norms. However, neither of the blocs was agreeable to all the rules proposed by the other side. Using whatever limited consensus the two superpowers could achieve, they created a “subdued rules-based system”. This was made operational through a handful of international organisations such as the UNSC (United Nations Security Council), NPT (Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty), and the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency). This system was subdued not just because it had



negligible influence in the Communist bloc, but also because more-than-a-hundred NAM (Non-Aligned Movement) countries were not directly a part of this system. Moreover, on issues such as global disarmament, the NAM countries showed stronger adherence to rules and normative principles than either of the super powers. Failure of major international stakeholders to sign the TPNW (Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons), UNCLOS (United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea), SEANWFZ (Southeast Asian Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone Treaty) are just a few examples showcasing the double standards of major powers with regard to the international rules.

Furthermore, from a non-Western perspective, the post-Cold War ‘rules-based’ order has not been that liberal after all. The non-western world is still deliberately kept out of this order especially when it comes to shaping the rules. “Do as I say, not as I do” seems to be the guiding philosophy of the contemporary international order. The ‘Black Lives Matter’ movement and the insurrection plotted by supporters of Donald Trump, in their different ways, expose the flaws in the popular narrative. Unsurprisingly, crafty attempts by the Western media to play down the constitutional crisis in the US showcases the loopholes in the Western narrative of ‘rules’ in the ‘rules-based’ order. A similar situation in Indonesia, Ukraine, or Brazil would have led to assiduous diplomatic footwork by major powers – ranging between the issuance of warnings

to deploying observers in such countries. Similarly, the lukewarm response to the rise of right-wing populism in Europe – together with the sharp increase in hate crimes, racism, discrimination against minorities and asylum seekers – suggests the same set of rules mean something different to the Western than the non-Western world. Such systemic flaws in the liberal international order, in fact, are leading to its own decline. The failure of the World Health Organisation to give a patient hearing to Taiwan in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, and to conduct a free and fair enquiry regarding the origin and spread of the COVID-19 virus, is a tell-tale sign of its apparent defects.

Arguably, the flaws in the Bretton Woods institutions have led to the birth of non-western financial institutions such as AIIB (Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank) and the NDB (New Development Bank) led by China, India, and Russia. Devoted to capacity-building in non-western countries, AIIB is a clear manifestation of non-western countries standing up to the discriminatory practices of the Bretton Woods institutions. Clearly, the international economic RBO needs to be reformed to achieve a more inclusive and egalitarian outlook. This would not only benefit the non-western world but would also assist the contemporary RBO to ensure longevity. Reforming the UNSC to include emerging non-western powers such as Japan, India, and Brazil would be another important step. The liberal order is still fixated with the power

equations prevalent in the post-second World War system. The contemporary international nuclear order — manifested in the NPT (the Non-Proliferation Treaty) — also does not reflect the realities of international nuclear politics, and needs to be reformed.

This imperial bias of the liberal world order is obvious when we see the United Kingdom clinging to membership of the UNSC – despite its abysmal contribution to global security, its inward-looking mercantilist economic policies, and its anti-immigrant sentiments manifested in BREXIT. In fact, BREXIT will go down in history as the UK’s regressive move to part ways with the European Union – considered the epitome of modern liberal international ideals.

A RBO is possible if grounded in universally agreed principles, which are backed by institutions that have the legitimacy and wherewithal to implement those principles and ensure a peaceful and stable environment. The future international/regional orders would require agreed rules – and must be accommodative to conflicting ideologies. Negotiations and compromises are necessary to ensure a functional — if necessarily complicated — international system.

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## ‘Rules-Based’ Order in the Post-Unipolar World

**Rahul Mishra**

Terms such as ‘rules-based order’ (RBO) and the ‘liberal international order’ became popular during the last decade of the twentieth century. Since the end of the Cold War, these two terms have often been used interchangeably. The collapse of the USSR, America’s rise as the global hegemon — and the romanticisation of that unprecedented phenomenon as an irreversible victory of liberalism, the unipolar moment and the end of history — led to the assumption that there is no alternative to liberalism. Furthermore, it also created a false sense of the

universality of ideas and norms that were hitherto prevalent mainly in the so-called ‘free world’ as well as in some of its former colonies.

Clearly, ‘rules’ of the contemporary international order are deeply embedded in Western civilization and the ‘modern’ political philosophical principles the West propagates. These standards are not necessarily impartial, egalitarian, or universal but are still acknowledged as guiding principles of the contemporary international system. Some of the core

ideas include: democracy, respect for human rights, free and open trade, responsible government, sovereign equality of nations, rule of law, and universal applicability of international law.

Lack of consensus in seeking a universally-acceptable definition of the RBO is due to the fact that it is often projected as the mirror image of the US-led Western liberal order. Both ideological and power politics equations have shaped this understanding in the

non-western world. No western power, for instance, would support a non-western, quasi-liberal, RBO that Russia might aim to establish – with the Central Asian, Caucasus, and the Balkan regions under its ambit. To some, even the Russo-Chinese regional order, being built through the SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation) is unacceptable and a threat to the RBO. Apart from these so-called revisionist states, ASEAN shows some deviations beyond the western normal. As Amitav Acharya has pointed out, convergence of authoritarian values with commitments to economic development, regime security, and political stability can form the basis of a non-western security community (and regional order). However, these issues are always a matter of debate between non-western and western powers, with the latter using them as a bargaining chip to exercise hegemonic control. In this respect, it is difficult to decipher how western powers choose some authoritarian regimes such as Saudi Arabia or Thailand over others.

Arguably, a rules-based order hinges on four key pillars. First and foremost is: a set of rules that are acceptable to member countries and applicable to potential members irrespective of their location, politico-economic capacities, and ethnic composition. Second, these rules must be backed by a range of institutions that create enabling economic and politico-security architectures which, in turn, bind the institutions together. Third, there needs to be the promise to deliver a peaceful and disciplined system that minimises the possibility of conflicts (at least among the member states). Fourth, there has to be a legitimacy, without which no order can be sustained for long. The legitimacy issue is one of the challenges China is facing with regard to its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China's BRI investments often fall short in terms of showcasing its normative agency. Apprehensions regarding lack of transparency, debt-trap diplomacy, environmentally and financially unsustainable investment patterns, and also regarding a China-centric trade, investment and developmental approach, have led to the BRI having a 'credibility shortfall'.

Contrary to popular perceptions, the constituent ideas of a RBO are not of recent origin. A precursor to the idea of a RBO, for instance, is the fourteen

principles set forth by Woodrow Wilson in his speech before the joint session of Congress on January 8, 1918. For one, freedom of navigation, nowadays perceived by China as the latest American ploy to contain it, was a key component of the Wilsonian principles.

To be sure, even during the Cold War era, the bipolar order was based on rules and norms. However, neither of the blocs was agreeable to all the rules proposed by the other side. Using whatever limited consensus the two superpowers could achieve, they created a "subdued rules-based system". This was made operational through a handful of international organisations such as the UNSC (United Nations Security Council), NPT (Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty), and the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency). This system was subdued not just because it had negligible influence in the Communist bloc, but also because more-than-a-hundred NAM (Non-Aligned Movement) countries were not directly a part of this system. Moreover, on issues such as global disarmament, the NAM countries showed stronger adherence to rules and normative principles than either of the super powers. Failure of major international stakeholders to sign the TPNW (Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons), UNCLOS (United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea), SEANWFZ (Southeast Asian Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone Treaty) are just a few examples showcasing the double standards of major powers with regard to the international rules.

Furthermore, from a non-Western perspective, the post-Cold War 'rules-based' order has not been that liberal after all. The non-western world is still deliberately kept out of this order especially when it comes to shaping the rules. "Do as I say, not as I do" seems to be the guiding philosophy of the contemporary international order. The 'Black Lives Matter' movement and the insurrection plotted by supporters of Donald Trump, in their different ways, expose the flaws in the popular narrative. Unsurprisingly, crafty attempts by the Western media to play down the constitutional crisis in the US showcases the loopholes in the Western narrative of 'rules' in the 'rules-based' order. A similar situation in Indonesia, Ukraine, or Brazil would have led to assiduous diplomatic footwork by major powers –

ranging between the issuance of warnings to deploying observers in such countries. Similarly, the lukewarm response to the rise of right-wing populism in Europe — together with the sharp increase in hate crimes, racism, discrimination against minorities and asylum seekers — suggests the same set of rules mean something different to the Western than the non-Western world. Such systemic flaws in the liberal international order, in fact, are leading to its own decline. The failure of the World Health Organisation to give a patient hearing to Taiwan in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, and to conduct a free and fair enquiry regarding the origin and spread of the COVID-19 virus, is a tell-tale sign of its apparent defects.

Arguably, the flaws in the Bretton Woods institutions have led to the birth of non-western financial institutions such as AIIB (Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank) and the NDB (New Development Bank) led by China, India, and Russia. Devoted to capacity-building in non-western countries, AIIB is a clear manifestation of non-western countries standing up to the discriminatory practices of the Bretton Woods institutions. Clearly, the international economic RBO needs to be reformed to achieve a more inclusive and egalitarian outlook. This would not only benefit the non-western world but would also assist the contemporary RBO to ensure longevity. Reforming the UNSC to include emerging non-western powers such as Japan, India, and Brazil would be another important step. The liberal order is still fixated with the power equations prevalent in the post-second World War system. The contemporary international nuclear order — manifested in the NPT (the Non-Proliferation Treaty) — also does not reflect the realities of international nuclear politics, and needs to be reformed.

This imperial bias of the liberal world order is obvious when we see the United Kingdom clinging to membership of the UNSC – despite its abysmal contribution to global security, its inward-looking mercantilist economic policies, and its anti-immigrant sentiments manifested in BREXIT. In fact, BREXIT will go down in history as the UK's regressive move to part ways with the European Union – considered the epitome of modern liberal international ideals.

A RBO is possible if grounded in universally agreed principles, which are



backed by institutions that have the legitimacy and wherewithal to implement those principles and ensure a peaceful and stable environment. The future international/regional orders would require agreed rules – and must be

accommodative to conflicting ideologies. Negotiations and compromises are necessary to ensure a functional — if necessarily complicated — international system.

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## How Track II Organisations Can Move Forward the Discussion of the RBO

Zha Daojiong and Dong Ting

The notion of a rules-based order (RBO) has a natural appeal, as integration into the world is more a reality than a choice, including for countries like China. Integration in the economic realm, most directly through trade and investment, is dictated by world economic geography. Integration in the realm of philosophies for domestic economic and political governance is contentious, in spite of insistence from liberal visions of order that see liberal triumph as both desirable and inevitable. The military security realm is even more complex but order can be assumed to mean peaceful coexistence between countries. All these factors make continuation of international debates and discussions about rules and order worthwhile.

Views about how the world came to be ordered the way it is today are reflective of vantage points in different countries. Questioning from Chinese quarters about prevalent liberal versus illiberal orders stems, at least in part, from incompatibility in institutional memories. China was a non-participant in international institutions from the time of the First World War to 1971, when China joined the United Nations. It is important, therefore, to agree on a common vantage point that resists hierarchical, linear and ahistorical narratives.

As such, frames like ‘Liberal RBO’, ‘Conservative RBO’ or ‘Consensus RBO’ may turn out to be unhelpful - because they are more reflective of an ideology-led pre-supposition about who (which nation) has more right to define ‘order’ and to determine what brings about disorder. The substantive merits of such labels need careful examination to minimize the risk of simply generating political-diplomatic acrimony.

It is useful for discussions about behaviour affecting international order

to factor in the symbiotic relationship between foreign and domestic policy. For example, as a good part of both international and domestic policy is underpinned by specific traditions of law, differences between civic law and customary law traditions can lead to competing interpretations about compliance with a rule. In the international realm, when a country’s implementation of an agreed rule tends to fall in line with the civic law tradition, should it be evaluated by applying principles or norms from customary law?

At the risk of oversimplification, under a civic law tradition (which was developed primarily in Europe), disputes between parties with competing interests over an issue are resolved by applying codified laws and policies that are identified to be directly pertinent. How prior cases of an apparently similar nature have been treated is not seen to be relevant – with the issue of similarity itself being considered contentious. By contrast, under a customary law tradition, it is allowed to invoke principles from the past – derived from a jurisdiction that one party deems applicable for dealing with the case on hand. Translated into the international sphere, a country with a civic law tradition is more likely to restrict its obligation to those treaties it has signed and ratified. Whereas a country with a customary law tradition might well insist that traditional practices, including those preceding the particular treaty in question, should have an equally binding effect on behaviour. Today, differences between China and other countries’ approach to the South China Sea, in part, arise as China insists on dispute resolution over sovereignty among claimants according to specific agreements established in the past among them, while some user states focus only on the applicability of laws and approaches established in situations

beyond the South China Sea context.

All international rules contain elements of procedure and substance, both of which can and often do fall behind changes in realities on the ground. A case in point is peace keeping, a substantive matter in the UN Charter. But what is seen to constitute peace — or how disruption of the peace comes about — is constantly evolving, as must the response from the international community. The same is true of trade and investment treaties. Negotiated agreements are reflective of how existent impediments are understood - but market developments, corporate innovation included, often quickly make such rules outdated. Such changes lead to a search for new principles and venues of dispute resolution.

At the level of peace and major power conflicts, the ideal of all states accepting the boundaries of single set of rules raises even weightier questions: What should be done about the existing rules? Who will decide what matters? Who will write new rules? Who are the guardians of implementation?

Faced with such a daunting but inescapable agenda, it is natural to think of creating momentum by tackling specific issue areas, some of them new. In certain cases — such as data management — the aim might be to create a pioneering set of rules. In areas like commercial shipping, global health and outer space, the objective might be updated and/or expanded rules.

In these specific areas we can again face perspective differences. To take data management: countries such as the United States with monopolistic data corporations define order as allowing unimpeded flows and data storage in legal jurisdictions under their governments. In contrast, countries like China and some in Southeast Asia prefer to have local data storage requirements

to assist prosecution of misuse of data. In the example of public health, especially in dealing with a contagious disease, some countries insist on sovereign ownership of virus specimens and their isolates and prosecute unsanctioned access to them by vaccine and medicine developers in another country as biopiracy. But some other countries denounce such notions and actions as mere irresponsibility that ought to be eliminated.

To move the discussion about RBO forward — whether at government-to-government level or in Track 2 forums such as the Council for Security

Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP) — we need to keep in mind that order is intended to deliver predictability, to minimise the risks that any action or reaction will create dangerous surprise. A strong commitment to transparency and communication is indispensable to these goals; but we can also presume a strong sentiment that the rules set out for any domain ought to have been arrived at collectively, and that there has been a common understanding of what constitutes compliance.

In the international arena, there is a continuing need for flexibility

— a willingness to be content with arrangements that deliver a workable degree of order. We should be wary of approaches that insist that ‘one size should fit all’, or which see the RBO deliberations primarily as opportunities to complain about the behaviour of other states.

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## Rules-Based Order? Strengthening Consensus on the Rules and Principles Underpinning the International Order

Joel Ng, Sarah Teo, and Benjamin Ho

The international “Rules-Based Order” (RBO) is an amalgamation of different forces, institutions, and structures — each applying uneven pressure or facing unequal tensions depending on the power distribution, political goals, or historical disagreements of the members that comprise that order. If left to small states, they would overwhelmingly support an impartial, egalitarian, and transparent system with periodic inputs — conducted democratically — to further enhance the system’s effectiveness.

But insofar as major powers have needed to be satisfied with the content of these rules, bargains and exceptions have had to be allowed to secure their buy-in. The most well-known example of such privileging is the way the United Nations (UN) Security Council gives a right of veto to each of the five Permanent Members. Such inequalities certainly permeate other global institutions. These inequalities include weighted voting, differentiated rates of contributions to the budget of the organisations, and variations in who qualifies to be recipients of international aid. At the same time, these inequalities have also been counterbalanced by the sovereign weight of individual nation-states, where small states have always outnumbered the large.

### Whose rules, whose order?

Many analyses of the RBO have tried to simplify its complexities in an attempt

to explain, justify or normalize certain features — in a way that favours particular methods or ideals. These analyses have benefited from a now passé unipolar moment at the end of the Cold War — a moment that over-emphasised the West’s approach to managing international relations and even claimed universality for the system as it stood in the 1990s.

This liberal order has been challenged both internally in the West — as the rise of populism has shown — and externally by rising powers, exemplified by China’s demand for increased recognition of its status. As a result, the understanding of how the RBO must evolve to manage the new dynamics necessitates reflecting on its past complexity of power distributions, bargains, and the ostensibly “universal” rules that comprise it. Challengers too must appeal to broader interests to gain acceptance, and this may even involve presenting their ideas as “universal”.

As tensions have risen, accusations of rule-breaking have been levelled at rising powers. But it is not sufficient to simply label them “rule-breakers”. It is important to keep in mind that the rising power may not have been sufficiently powerful in the past to have had a seat where the old bargain was made, and that some of the rising power’s alleged “violations” may reflect the incompatibility of the current system with that power’s developing aspirations. The attempts of such rising powers now to drive a new bargain

should be treated seriously. The costs and benefits of according greater influence at the table of global governance ought to be more broadly and strategically evaluated, not repeating the mistakes of the rebuff to Germany and Japan when they sought revisions for expanded influence in the 1990s.

In thinking about rule-breaking, it is important to keep in mind that the international order must offer stability, and the actions of any state beyond its borders can impinge on the circumstances of other states. Care must therefore be taken that states with contentions about the system are not backed into a corner, finding it better off going alone. Not only does this present no winners, but the fragmentation harms other states, producing instability and unpredictable consequences, and raises the cost of reordering the system.

Whereas fragmentation in the international economic system — such as multiple trading blocs, financial institutions, and so forth — has not led to insecurity, it has delayed any potential convergence towards a globally-consistent system and produced fractures that will be hard to harmonise. The dangers of fragmentation in the security order pose even greater risks — even though a proliferation of institutions may yet be an essential element in mitigating the discontent with the global system.



## An RBO for all?

Established powers need to acknowledge the privileged position they occupied at the time of the writing of ‘the rules’ – ‘rules’ that allowed them to define the terms in ways that suited their interests. They must trust that the system they created — the system that gave the world its most stable half century — will prevail, and that new powers will not supplant the international order, even if they take greater roles and seek greater influence within it. Some adjustments must be made, however, to enhance the global RBO, helping it to re-legitimise itself.

On their part, new powers should take care not to tread on other states even as they legitimately seek to define and establish their new status in international affairs. Showing that they understand the responsibilities that come with status will assist rising actors to counter accusations of merely seeking power. One way they might convey this sense of responsibility is in addressing new, emerging issues that

have not yet been dealt with in established structures of global management, or else are covered by norms or rules that urgently require updating for the 21st century. New issues would include health security, environmental management, cyberspace, and artificial intelligence.

As for small states, they need to demonstrate that their approach towards the RBO is more than just being conveniently aligned with major powers. In other words, they should either articulate support for the existing RBO or explain what characteristics need to be introduced in order to create a more equitable RBO. Where differences are difficult to resolve, the guiding principle should involve practical trust-building, with provision for early harvest from multilateral cooperation to incentivize greater and quicker convergence.

Ultimately, the RBO is an adaptive framework that must be (re)negotiated to accommodate the needs of both established and rising powers, as well

as small states. With growing discontent to its current structure, reforms may mean concessions from all members of the global community – big or small. As rules are necessarily shaped by power, the key to a 21st century RBO is the commitment of large powers not to over-extend their influence at the expense of small states’ interests. This ideal scenario is certainly easier said than done. Yet the contemporary world cannot function in healthy, peaceful, and secure development without give-and-take, and without trust in a rules-based co-existence.

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*The opinions presented are solely their own and do not necessarily represent the views of any affiliated institutions.*

## Commentary on Rules-Based Order in the Asia-Pacific

### Dr Tsutomu Kikuchi

The Rules-Based Order (RBO) is generally described as a shared commitment by all countries to conduct their activities in accordance with agreed rules – such as international law, regional security arrangements and trade agreements.

In order to create and maintain order, the power configuration that supports it is essential. The US was the key nation that built the RBO after the war, and a network of alliances centred on the US has supported the RBO. The alliances constitute an indispensable part of the RBO.

The RBO had been more assumed than talked about in regional discourse. Interest in these rules has been growing for the past decade or so – as illustrated in foreign and defence policy documents. Such words as ‘The RBO is increasingly under threat’ and ‘maintaining and strengthening the RBO is an urgent task’ reflect the recognition that major changes are occurring today in the international order created after World War II. Underlying this change has been the rise of China and several other nations, and

the relative decline in the power of the United States and the West.

Simply speaking, there are two types of rules in the international community. First, we have the rules that govern relationships, usually applied in interstate relations. Sovereignty, the principle of non-interference in domestic affairs, most-favoured-nation (MFN), reciprocity etc., are the rules that govern relations. There was an implicit assumption that the institutions and rules in each country were not necessarily the same. They were supposed to reflect the country’s unique history, traditions and culture.

Secondly, there are the rules that govern the content of domestic institutions and rules, not relations between nations. Here, the commonality between the institutions and rules of each country will be strictly examined. Democracy (political regime), market economy, good governance, human rights, protection of intellectual property rights, competition policy, the role of state in economic management are among them.

The RBO led by the US has been quite intrusive in nature, touching upon

domestic institutions and rules. Such domestic institutions and rules had been formed independently under the principles of national sovereignty and non-interference in domestic affairs – but came under the scrutiny of the international community. This could cause anxiety. Such scrutiny raised concerns in countries that had adopted different political and economic systems from those of the United States.

Furthermore, as we entered the age of globalisation, in which nations become increasingly interdependent – and money, people, goods, and information moved increasingly across national borders – the differences in the domestic institutions and rules of each country became a greater political point of contention. This is because differences in institutions and rules can hinder smooth exchange – and thus create a strong pressure to standardize and harmonize domestic institutions and rules. There will be strong pressure to conform to ‘global standards’. For some countries, the problem was exacerbated because it was the US that eagerly promoted globalisation – especially

as the post-Cold War world became an era of US uni-polarity.

The period when the countries of the Asia-Pacific region joined the global economy and developed their economies coincided with the period when the 'hegemonic' United States was actively promoting globalisation. Some countries in the Asia-Pacific emerged as desperate to take full advantage of the benefits of globalisation but avoid the difficulties that standardization and harmonization of domestic institutions and rules would cause at home. They took full advantage of the benefits of RBOs' 'rules governing relations,' such as trade and investment liberalisation, but were cautious about adopting rules governing domestic institutions and rules. There are many countries in Asia that have such concerns. China is the country that has felt this concern most acutely.

RBOs were flexible and not mandatory. Many Asian countries were able to avoid assimilation to 'global standards'. Such a stance was tolerated when the economies of such countries were in the early of stage of development and small in size – but as they grew in size and threatened the developed countries, the attitude towards them changed. The pressure for standardisation of domestic institutions and rules has increased – and was seen in

certain quarters as an attempt at regime change through peaceful means. From this point of view, the emphasis on the RBO has been viewed by some countries as possessing a hidden aim - to hinder their development. Such countries also tend to see the existence of a network alliances as an integral part of the RBO as a threat.

To reconcile such contrasting views on the RBO will be demanding. It is also necessary to create rules in new areas such as cyber and outer-space. As the response to COVID-19 suggests, international cooperation has been weakened and new rule-making will be difficult. Of importance is whether there is a possibility of cooperation between the US and China (and Russia). In the case of the Cold War between the US and the Soviet Union, while there was a fierce confrontation, partial cooperation was achieved - and the nuclear arms control treaties were concluded in order to avoid a nuclear war. It can be argued that this cooperation was only possible after the Cuban Missile Crisis, which brought the US and the Soviet Union to the brink of a nuclear crisis. Do the US, China (and Russia) need a further crisis prior to achieve substantial cooperation?

In terms of how we describe the RBO today, only the phrase 'liberal RBO' has any significance in the Asia-Pacific. This is

not to say that I support the US position. It is just that in today's increasingly globalised world, where the forces of diverse nations must come together to tackle difficult challenges, the RBO must be underlined by a liberal theory of order that embraces such rules and norms as national sovereignty, human rights, the rule of law, transparency, good governance, and global governance. If we consider such descriptions as 'Conservative RBO' and 'Consensus RBO', there is RBO based on a minimum set of rules that can be easily agreed upon by the countries involved. Such a minimalist view of the RBO will not help solve the problems facing the region.

The Asia-Pacific is not the bystander in international relations that it once was. As a region responsible for the future shape of the international community, it should build a RBO that can contribute to solving the problems of the international community. We should pursue a maximalist position on RBOs, not a minimalist one.

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## Rules-Based Order in Outer Space

### Dr Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan

Concerns and debates about a Rules-Based Order (RBO) show no sign of flagging. Mostly, these debates have come in the context of the changing global balance of power and an increasingly aggressive China that has in both subtle and open ways disregarded the rules of the road that were established by the US and the West in the post-Second World War period. Much of this debate is focused on the Indo-Pacific. With the rise of China, India, and the emergence of a "normal" Japan, the Indo-Pacific region is going through a strategic churn and competition in many areas. The fact that these emerging powers also have a baggage of history and unresolved border and territorial issues make the question of RBOs even more significant.

Proponents of the RBO in the Indo-Pacific

worry about the use or threat of force and coercion while dealing with international disputes in the region. The term has gained greater currency in countries like India, Japan and Australia – which have faced the brunt of China's aggressive tactics, including trade coercion and wolf-warrior diplomacy. For example, in 2016, while leaving for Japan for the annual summit meeting with Prime Ministers Abe, Indian Prime Minister Modi highlighted the India-Japan "commitment to an open, inclusive and rules-based global order." Similarly, after meeting Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong on the sidelines of the 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue, Modi said that India and Singapore remain committed to "a rules-based order for maritime security".

In the face of a rising China, the US has

been at the forefront in promoting the RBO. Former US Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, for example, has characterised the RBO as "the greatest gift of the greatest generation." There are questions about whether countries pursuing a liberal international order are sufficiently liberal in their own domestic behaviour; also, a major challenge to efforts to promote such an order has come from the failure of some proponent countries to follow these principles themselves in the international sphere. The US, for instance, has not signed the UNCLOS even though it is seeking to promote many of the principles of UNCLOS. While these criticisms may have some intellectual justification, they need to be kept in perspective because they are ultimately less serious than gross violations of even the most basic



international norms carried out by others.

The debate of RBO has gained traction because of possible different interpretation of what RBO means from the national perspectives of different countries.

Broadly, the understanding of the RBO is of respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, observance of international law and freedom of navigation and overflight, and peaceful resolution of disputes without resorting to use or threat of force. But China appears to be using very different yardstick when it comes to issues such as sovereignty and territorial integrity or use of force in addressing territorial disputes. The liberal international order, of which RBO is an important part, lays emphasis on human rights and individual freedoms, which are again problematic in China's conception of RBO. China's behaviour today is one where it wants to continue reaping benefits from the existing RBO but proposes new, narrower rules and concepts that suit only its interests. China is establishing new institutions at least in the financial sector like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and BRICS Development Bank, which could eventually challenge the global economic and financial institutions such as the World Bank or International Monetary Fund. But China is yet to make any serious dent in the security sector given the yawning gap between what Beijing professes and the reality on the ground.

Apart from dispute in established areas, there are new areas where international rules have to be established. In the case of outer space, some elements of a RBO are already in place. This is not to suggest there are no problems with the outer space regime. In fact, this domain has changed significantly over the last decade or so. It is becoming more crowded and congested with more than 80 active players in the space domain with some engaged in the development of counter-space capabilities – with the potential to disrupt, damage and destroy space assets. Space is no more a safe and secure sanctuary. The task of space governance and maintenance of a rules-based order is extremely challenging. Instances of creating satellite service disruptions have been on the increase – and disruptions from such activities impact across geographical boundaries and sectors, given that dependence on space spans from economic and social sectors to military and security domains.

Space is no more dominated by the rich or great power players. Proliferation of space technology in the last few decades has democratised the space sector such that a large number of developing countries across Asia, Africa and Latin America have woken up to the enormous benefits of space in their daily lives. Countries depend on space for a number of utilities including telecommunications, satellite-based navigation systems, weather forecasting and security needs such as intelligence, reconnaissance and surveillance.

Space is also no more a domain exclusive to state players. The sector has a sizeable number of private sector players of varying sizes and capacities. Traditionally, private sector participation was mostly in the context of the West but over the last few years, there are several start-ups as well as medium-size enterprises coming from China and India, as well as Australia. While this new phenomenon brings many benefits, including making access to space cheaper, it also makes the need for new rules and regulations more acute. Without appropriate regulatory mechanisms both at the domestic and global context, the commercial actors cannot play an effective role despite being competent stakeholders.

The presence of these actors also adds complications. Many private sector players such as SpaceX plan to launch thousands of satellites to cater to growing broadband needs. Outer space is also crowded with a significant amount of space junk. According to NASA, there are more than 23,000 orbital debris larger than 10 cm and an estimated number of approximately 500,000 particles between 1 and 10 cm in diameter. The number of debris pieces larger than 1 mm is in excess of 100 million. Such congestion is likely to increase strongly as private sector actors join more players from developing countries.

Unless there are effective rules of the road governing outer space activities, sustainable use of space is in serious danger. Outer space activities today are governed by a few legal instruments including the foundational treaty mechanism, the Outer Space Treaty (OST) of 1967. But this treaty and other associated agreements — such as the Registration Convention, the Liability Convention and the Rescue Agreement —

were introduced in the 1960s and 1970s when the threats and challenges were significantly different. Many of these treaties suffer from loopholes and are interpreted in particular ways by one state or another to accommodate their narrow interests.

For example, Russia's April 2020 ASAT test resulted in massive war of words between Russia and the US. Similarly, the Russia's test of a space-based ASAT weapon in July 2020 (wherein Russia released a new object into orbit from Cosmos 2543) invited sharp criticism from the US. The US cited the Russian test as "further proof of Russia's hypocritical advocacy of outer space arms control proposals designed to restrict the capabilities of the United States while clearly having no intention of halting their counterspace weapons programs." On the other hand, the Russian Defence Ministry was categorical that the inspector-satellite (of July 2020) was only to "monitor the condition of Russian satellites." Russian state daily, Rossiiskaya Gazeta added that the satellite could also be used for "get[ting] information from somebody else's satellites."

There have also been differences in how states have interpreted key space security concepts during debates to formulate new rules of the road. For instance, the Outer Space Treaty's prohibition of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) has been interpreted by some of the major spacefaring powers as not denying the use of conventional weapons in space. Also efforts to strengthen certain norms as part of the RBO as it applies to space are faced with challenges. In the current context of growing security competition driven by balance of power dynamics, new players are seen to be diluting some of the prevalent norms in the space domain. The norm that prevailed for two decades to not conduct an ASAT test was broken in 2007 by China, followed by India in 2019. Similarly, the increasing use of electronic and cyber warfare means in outer space is violating norms like non-interference in each other's satellite operations. Therefore, on the one hand, certain norms are being diluted and on the other, efforts to create new ones, either in the form of legal measures or political instruments, have not gone very far, putting safe, secure and sustainable use of outer space in serious risks.

For instance, the OST prohibits the placement of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in space - but it makes no mention of conventional weapons, which is a serious lacunae. Today, the threats are more in the conventional weapons domain, which suggest that we need to change the existing rules and norms or develop new ones. The growth of newer counter-space capabilities, such as cyber and electronic warfare in space, in addition to anti-satellite weapons, also poses significant challenges. The existing rules do not have any restriction on these developments. Unless effective measures

are brought out in a timely manner, proliferation and testing of these weapons cannot be ruled out.

The early trends towards space weaponisation and space debris challenges point to the urgent need to develop new norms and rules. This can be done by modifying existing mechanisms and by creating new ones. Both these routes appear problematic in today's increasingly fraught international political climate. But if one has to be able to have safe and secure access to outer space, we need multilateral negotiations

where all Member States can agree on a fresh RBO for outer space, a set of rules and regulations to guide outer space activities.

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## Strengthening Consensus on the Rules and Principles Underpinning International Order

**Andrew Godwin**

The term 'Rules Based Order' (RBO) to describe the international order to which all countries should aspire has lost its cachet. References to the RBO tend to be identified with one perspective only — such as that associated with the post-War liberal international order led by the US — and to get mired in arguments about how rules should be interpreted, why the rule-makers have not followed the rules themselves and why those who have traditionally been rule-takers are not content with following the existing rules and insist on establishing their own (competing) rules or order.

The rise of the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), for example, is seen by some as establishing an institutional order that competes with the World Bank and the IMF and prioritises norms or rules such as non-interference and state-led development policies over the liberalism as espoused by the RBO. That is not to say that rules are not essential: global issues of existential significance make it more important than ever to achieve cooperation in respect to the international order. But 'rules' are often expressed as 'values', or high-level principles and are consequently difficult to interpret and subject to contention.

Rules, it should be said, are unlikely to be followed or respected if they are not linked to behavioural norms or outcomes. Even when they are so linked, the rules are vulnerable to being disregarded

or distorted if a country believes that another country is not applying the rules in a fair and non-discriminatory manner. The two main principles underpinning the multilateral trading system, for instance, are reciprocity and non-discrimination. These two principles speak to fairness, which is a fundamental concept within the human psyche and the core principle by which most societies are governed. What exactly is meant by 'fairness', however, is a matter of contention.

Interpretative difficulties abound in the multilateral trading system. An example is the ongoing debate about the interpretation of concepts such as the 'normal value' of goods and a 'non-market economy' in the context of anti-dumping cases under the World Trade Organization (WTO) framework. In determining whether imported goods have been dumped below their 'normal value', certain countries continue to use the normal value of the goods in a 'surrogate country' to determine whether goods from a non-market economy have been dumped. This is because a non-market economy is considered to be one in which there is a high level of government intervention that makes it impractical to use prices and costs in that market for determining anti-dumping margins. The United States continues to treat China as a non-market economy and to use a surrogate country to determine the normal value of certain imported goods

from China, triggering an ongoing dispute between the two countries.

China argues that under the terms of its WTO accession protocol, all WTO members — including the United States — should have ceased treating China as a non-market economy by December 11, 2016. The United States argues that those terms do not automatically require it to extend market economy status to China.

Difficulties between countries are exacerbated when high-level principles expressed in international treaties are implemented in domestic legislation. An example of these difficulties are the claims brought by the United States against China in relation to China's domestic implementation of principles in the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) — such as the thresholds for criminal enforcement obligations and trading rights in respect of films and home entertainment products.

Differences in perspectives affect cooperation and understanding. These differences occur in specific areas such as the application of national interest and national security tests in foreign investment approval regimes. At a broad, philosophical level, clashes of perspective occur when Western liberal democracies — such as the United States and its allies — view the RBO as incorporating a broad range of incontrovertible values,



including those relating to human rights, political and religious freedoms and environmental protection. Against this view, many developing countries such as China have traditionally viewed the RBO primarily through an economic lens, arguing that it is unfair to expect developing countries to subscribe to these broader values before they have achieved economic modernisation and self-sufficiency.

There would be benefit in devoting greater attention to fairness in outcomes as a defining and unifying concept within the RBO — but there are again different perspectives about fairness and how fair outcomes might be achieved. Greater effort needs to be made by each country to understand the ‘other’ perspective or viewpoint, even if they do not agree with it, and to avoid delegitimising or rejecting the other perspective on the ground that it is spurious or based purely on self-interest. This is of critical importance in enabling countries to move beyond positional negotiations to interest-based negotiations. The competing claims in respect of the South China Sea provide an example of the challenges in this regard.

In seeking consensus, a stress on outcomes may be helpful. It is important here to move beyond arguing positions towards identifying interests through an understanding of the motivations that underpin those interests.

Turning to another issue, in what areas would the existing RBO benefit from amending or up-dating?

One area that is becoming increasingly global in its reach and impact is artificial intelligence (AI) — and related areas

such as big data, cyber security, privacy and data protection. AI will challenge the existing order as it transcends borders and sovereign control. Of particular importance is maintaining transparency in the use of AI, trust in the technology involved and an appropriate balance between technology and human oversight. Jurisdictions around the world are increasingly adopting principles and standards for the regulation of AI. For example, the European Commission ‘White Paper on Artificial Intelligence — A European Approach to Excellence and Trust’, which was issued in February 2020, is an example of a move towards establishing standards and rules protecting fundamental rights and consumers’ rights. Closer to home, the New Zealand government launched an ‘algorithm charter’ in July 2020 to act as a guideline for government agencies on how to use algorithms and how to ensure that people have confidence that algorithms are being used in a fair, ethical, and transparent way.

The adoption of comprehensive standards and rules, however, is challenging for countries that do not have advanced legal or regulatory frameworks for consumer protection in areas such as privacy and data protection. The need for a global approach that standardises these principles and standards and strengthens consensus and cooperation in this fast-moving area is essential. Without a focus on outcomes, however, it will be difficult to achieve a globally harmonised approach. A recent example is the controversy over the possible use of face-recognition AI by technology companies to identify members of ethnic communities.

In the absence of international consensus on the appropriate outcomes for the use of technology — supported by principles and rules — it will be very difficult to avoid ethnic discrimination and persecution.

There is also value in learning from those areas in which consensus and cooperation have been effective, such as health and international crime, and exploring ways in which the success in these areas can be translated into other areas. Global cooperation in the fight against drug syndicates is an area that has enjoyed relative success, largely because there is a consensus on the outcomes and fairness in achieving outcomes. Although outcomes are combined with rules and principles, it is the outcomes that drive the rules and principles rather than vice versa.

From this perspective, the RBO should be updated to strengthen its focus on outcomes. What could be described as an ‘outcomes-focussed RBO’ would recognise the need to achieve clarity around outcomes and to design the rules and principles with those outcomes in mind. The adoption of an outcomes-based approach is increasingly common in areas of domestic regulation such as financial regulation, and there is no reason why a similar approach could not be considered and applied in international relations.

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## Greater Role for Smaller States in the Rules-Based Order

### Prof. Dang Cam Tu

‘Rules-based order’ (RBO) is currently among the most frequently repeated terms in world politics, often in response to a contrary reality — that is, the imperfection of international laws, the inefficacy or lack of governance, and the tilt towards a power-based order. Consensus either remains on the general definition or it is tacitly acknowledged — the international RBO refers to a shared commitment of countries to conduct their behaviour and interaction in accordance

with agreed rules and principles, explicitly articulated in various forms of international cooperation documents. There are differences of viewpoint and emphasis, but these are in the details — especially when influenced by players’ interests, values, and perceived power in real and evolving dynamics of regional and global governance.

The hard experience from two devastating world wars informed the

popular perception and expectation of the international RBO as an alternative to international coercion by confrontational superpowers. The international order constructed after the Second World War and consolidated during the Cold War was also guided by liberal and internationalist beliefs shared among political elites in Western countries — and designed to counter assumed challenges from socialist countries, nationalist states elsewhere, and isolationist tendencies

in the US. Small and medium countries look to the RBO for a neutral platform where they hope to stand on equal footing with more powerful countries and be protected from intimidation or coercive power. More powerful states, on their part, often choose to use the RBO as a leverage to impose their will on weaker counterparts.

Different imperatives lead to different interpretations and sometimes loose compliance behaviour – where players pick and choose the rules that suit them while ignoring those that do not. The negotiation on the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea between ASEAN and China illustrates well the difference with the latter attempting to selectively choose the parts of existing rules (UNCLOS) that serve its interests, either ignore or reinterpret others that do not from a power-based approach and impose its reinterpretation on the former who is endeavouring to uphold and reinforce existing rules. The term ‘RBO’ has therefore been deployed in pursuit of — and in response to — divergent interests and challenges. When power-based behaviour prevails, the outcome can be a mixed set of rule-taking, rule-setting, and rule-manipulation.

Today the RBO tends to be discussed in terms of on-going intensified great power competition, especially between the US and China. Power rivalry is in part about a contest of influence on the process of rules-writing – and hence order-making. In international politics, big powers have obvious advantages – enjoying favourable conditions, including support from other states. The giants — including non-benign ones — can certainly discourage rather than promote both the legitimacy and efficacy of the order under their influence. The perceived inefficiency of the UN and other global governance institutions under the impact of US-China rivalry is a case in point. The two biggest powers, in accelerating their competition, undermine the global order by flouting existing rules – withdrawing from or abusing multilateral institutions, paralysing international cooperation, and intensifying divides within the international system. The term ‘RBO’ becomes subsumed in a discourse about global leadership – with two big powers advocating different visions and

modes of foreign relations, namely the Washington Consensus vs. the Beijing Consensus.

Concerns about great-power rivalry have resulted in a call for a less power-based and more participatory RBO, especially among small and medium countries. The perspectives and role of middle powers need stressing. They have tended to be at the core of the multi-layered web of regional governance rules and institutions, and the increasingly preferred mini-lateral forms of engagement. The normative power of ASEAN in the emerging Indo-Pacific strategic region provides a good example of the way small and medium powers — when they work together — can have a substantial impact.

Because it is difficult for dominant powers to enforce or initiate any norms without suspicious response and resistance, ASEAN has had an opportunity to play a central role in the norm-setting process. The Southeast Asian countries have achieved general acceptance on shared norms, for instance, with currently 39, including 29 non-ASEAN, countries becoming signatories to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC). Being an effective tool for ASEAN to preserve regional peace and stability in Southeast Asia for more than five decades — acceded to by all the major powers and many of the countries in the region — the TAC can serve as the core in building a larger code of conduct to advance trust and cooperation among states in the Indo-Pacific. The perceived increasing role of middle powers in enhancing the RBO also rests on the inclusive institutional arrangements and norms that they support – in contrast to the exclusive and competitive China-led Belt and Road Initiative and the US-led Indo-Pacific Strategy. Inclusiveness is a rule-making remedy that ASEAN and other middle powers tend to take in response to big power competition and rivalry.

Small and medium-sized states could have a special role in developing rules to govern new aspects of international life. Such aspects include cyber space, technology, global health, environmental protection, climate change and ageing. Rules in these areas might create challenges because they are non-

traditional frontiers with new logics, instruments, players, stakeholders, and forms of competition. For example, cyber space and technology have become new areas for competition among not only state players but also non-state players and stakeholders – a development that raises questions about the reconciliation and interpretation of laws on issues like sovereignty. Leadership at the domestic as well as the international level also needs attention here – given that many of the new areas for rule-making are more the concern of domestic players and stakeholders as well as small- and medium-sized states, and less relevant to the competitive logics of power politics.

In general, the phrase ‘Evolving RBO’ is better suited to describe the narrative underway – better, for instance, than speaking of ‘Liberal’, ‘Conservative’ or ‘Consensus’ RBO. ‘Evolving RBO’ reflects the need for updating the existing RBO with new rules and for promoting a more participatory RBO. The other phrases suggest wishful thinking about end results and promote rather than moderate dividing lines among players and stakeholders.

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# Rethinking the Rules-Based Order

**Amitav Acharya**

I do not think “Rules-Based Order” is a helpful or even meaningful concept. It immediately raises the question: “Whose rules”? The prevalent “order” has been dominated by the rules and institutions of the West, more specifically the European inter-state system, and expanded with some modifications by the United States. While some of these rules and institutions retain relevance, and helped stability and prosperity, “the rules” also have unsavoury, ambiguous and outdated features. Take for example “free trade”. This concept has become controversial even in the West. Multilateralism as a form of inter-state cooperation has also faced challenges from rising populism, both in the West and the Rest. In short, the legitimacy of the “rules” in the “Rules-Based Order” is increasingly contested. Rising powers like China are selective in keeping some rules, challenging others, and introducing some of their own.

For example, China supports globalisation but pursues it through its own nationalistic agenda and approach – which gives primacy to state-control, and state-owned enterprises, and operationalisation through policies such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Some other nations feel — fairly or unfairly — this approach is exploitative and a challenge to the free market economy. In the case of multilateralism, emerging powers such as India as well as China are supportive, but also demand serious reform of decision-making rules and leadership – especially with respect to giving these nations more voice and control.

Sometimes, the notion of a “Liberal International Order” (LIO) is conflated with “Rules-Based Order”. But as I wrote in my book, *The End of American World Order* (2014, 2018), the LIO was also a hegemonic order – more like a club of the West and dominated by the US, rather than an inclusive global order accepted by all. Large developing countries, including India and China, were not really accepted as equals into the LIO leadership. Its benefits accrued more to the West than to the Rest. The rule of the LIO also stressed Western ideology and

opposed alternatives, such as socialism and communitarianism.

On the other hand, the West is still reluctant to give credit to the ideas and rules developed initially by non-Western countries. Take for example the idea of “responsible sovereignty”, which was the basis of the “Responsibility to Protect” (R2P), the rule that stresses the responsibility to protect a state’s population, and not merely the state – and which acknowledges that the broader community of states might need to intervene in a state when its own government is not fulfilling that responsibility. While this is not a universally accepted rule, it is still a powerful norm which has shaped debates and actions about intervention in the past decades. African leaders played a major role in developing the concept and Africa was a major battleground and testing arena for this idea. But much credit went to Canada and Australia as pioneers of this norm, because these countries could put resources into developing the R2P as a policy concept at the UN level.

I think the world needs a thorough rethink of both the rules — the fundamental and operational rules that define international relations — and the institutions needed to support, sustain and implement these rules. I think global health is a primary example. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the limits of the mandate, rules and the institution (World Health Organisation) for combating global health emergencies. For example, giving the WHO more funding is not enough. There has to be a stronger mandate as well. This was underscored by Dr. Deborah Birx, the former coordinator of the Trump White House’s coronavirus task force, who argued that the country that is first exposed to a pandemic, “has really a higher moral obligation on communicating and transparency.” UN Members should push for the UN Security Council to make it mandatory for states to report and allow WHO fact-finding within days of a major disease outbreak – to avoid the kind of situation that happened in Wuhan where the novel

coronavirus was first detected and went out of control before the WHO could even send a fact-finding mission. Failure by a state to report outbreaks promptly and allow WHO fact-finding missions should be treated as being equivalent of aggression. Terrorism reporting, for instance, is now mandatory. The United Nations Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee (CTC) can be a model, but a shorter and incident-based reporting period for disease is necessary.

Another issue area where we need rules and a new mindset is environmental destruction and climate change. In past years, some of the worst forest fires have happened in Western countries: Australia (where billions of animals perished) and the US. Until recently, however, most of the media focus on environmental crisis in the Indo-Pacific region has been on deforestation and forest fires (for example, in Southeast Asia). Holding the more developed nations politically and even legally (and not just financially) accountable for damaging bio-diversity is critical to generate confidence in global rules.

Formulating new rules requires a new vocabulary of international engagement. The term “liberal RBO” is not useful because, as I have just said, who and what is “liberal” is contested, ambiguous and divisive. It can refer to domestic liberalism, with a stress on democracy – which invokes the idea of a ‘club of democracies’ (like the so-called Quad, the emerging US, India, Japan and Australia process), something that invites Chinese hostility. It can also refer to economic liberalism (free trade) and international multilateral institutions. These are not necessarily complementary. Authoritarian nations like China can support free trade areas (FTAs) — as is happening in the case of the recently-completed Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) — just as much as democracies like Australia and Japan have done. On the other hand, democracies like India and the US (under Trump at least) oppose them. “Conservative” would turn off a lot of people these days not because it is inherently a bad idea, but because

of its association with the unsavoury anti-immigration and anti-climate protection policies of incumbent regimes in Australia and the US. A “consensus” or middle ground between liberal and conservative rules may seem highly desirable, but it would be difficult to achieve given the extreme partisanship in domestic politics of many nations these days.

To sum up, I think the main problem in thinking about a Rules-Based Order is the baggage of Western dominance it carries and the tension between inclusiveness and privilege. As the world order changes through a redistribution of power, ideas and influence — or what I have called a Multiplex World Order — we need to make any “Rules-Based Order” more democratic, de-centred, transparent and inclusive. These should

be the primary organizing principles of the future of multilateralism.

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## Rules-Based Order: What Does the Region Think?

**Tony Milner and Ric Smith**

Prime Minister Morrison wishes us to live in a region “guided by international rules and norms”. This is at least part of his answer to the enormous strategic uncertainty, and potential peril, Australia faces in its immediate region — a set of conditions Morrison argues we have not seen since the 1930s.

With an anxious eye on tensions in the South China Sea in particular, the Australian leadership refers increasingly to the need to enhance and preserve the ‘Rules-Based Order’ (RBO) — an endeavour in which Australian diplomacy could play a key role.

Far from merely affirming an order taken for granted in the post-War American era, Australia in its 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper acknowledged specifically that the global order is not static. The institutions and rules that support global cooperation “can and do evolve”, it was said, and “must accommodate the greater weight of emerging powers”.

How could Australia contribute to revising the rules that mediate and moderate the behaviour of states? We must have a clear view of our national interests but also take account of perspectives from non-Western countries. Because Western thinking has dominated most discussion in Australia, the non-government Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP) — in cooperation with Asialink, University of Melbourne — sought views from a range of Asian region commentators.

Despite the geopolitical transition underway, we should note first that much of the international rules system

continues to hold. We live in a world of nation states claiming certain widely acknowledged sovereign rights. In practical matters, for instance, there is little contest about aviation or banking regulations — or even about the anti-whaling convention or conservation of Antarctica. The environmental protection agenda is increasingly seen as basic to human welfare, even in developing countries. As for the liberal economic order, despite serious debate on detail there is still a shared aspiration toward a rules-based and equitable trade system — partly because it has benefited non-Western as well as Western countries.

This said, there are important variations among regional views.

The first message from the regional essays is positive: there is wide support for some type of international rules system. As our Chinese commentator argues, “integration into the world is more a reality than a choice, including for countries like China”. Especially in the security area, he says, there is a need to “deliver predictability, to minimise the risks that any action or reaction will create dangerous surprise”. A Singapore commentary adds that the “contemporary world cannot function in healthy, peaceful, and secure development without give-and-take, and without trust in a rules-based co-existence”.

The second message is that the demand for a revised rules order is in part a result of a genuine clash of perspectives. For instance, a common understanding of navigational rights is lacking. As an Australian commentator points out, the US favours “an expansive interpretation of rights to navigation, which are at

least partly based on liberal ideals of free trade.” In Southeast Asia, such “extensive navigational rights” can cause concern in archipelagic states and others with extensive coastlines, which see a threat to the “security policies they have enacted for their maritime domains”. Another perspective difference, highlighted in a Chinese commentary, concerns “specific traditions of law”. Under civic law (developed primarily in Europe) disputes are resolved in terms of “codified laws and policies that are identified to be directly pertinent”. By contrast, according to the Chinese contributor, in a customary law tradition influential in China, “traditional practices, including those preceding the particular treaty in question” can be viewed as having “an equally binding effect on behaviour”. In the South China Sea, China — according to this essay — insists the sovereignty disputes need to take into account “specific agreements established in the past” — and not only the “applicability of laws and approaches established in situations beyond the South China Sea context”. By contrast, other parties prefer a black-letter reading of the UN Law of the Sea Convention.

In some cases, the RBO is distorted by a clash of emphasis. China and Singapore value economic rather than the political-security aspects. China has even expressed interest “at the highest level in the CPTPP [Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership], an agreement which the United States originally supported”. By contrast, Narendra Modi’s India is “ambivalent about the trade-economic aspects — as its 2020 refusal to join the



RCEP illustrates”. Another emphasis difference concerns whether the RBO ought to refer primarily to behaviour between states – or also to “internal arrangements” of individual states. In a survey carried out in 2019 by the Japan Committee of CSCAP, a number of countries (including China) focused on behaviour between states. The Japan response explained that although Japan in the past had been mainly concerned with “freedom of navigation and overflight”, the view has changed: “Japan thinks that now is the time for the Asia-Pacific to talk about domestic issues such as democratisation, human rights, good governance, transparency, accountability and so forth.”

As to ASEAN, as reported to a conference co-hosted by CSCAP, its member states tend to be unhappy with adversarial approaches – uncomfortable, for instance, with coercive diplomacy and a resort to military force, and also wary of joining military alliances. They focus on trust building and inclusivity – and “security arrangements that bind friends and foes alike”. They are determined not to “discriminate against any political system” and are thus wary of a “Quad of democracies”. Southeast Asian countries also seem to view regional institutions in a strongly emotive way – prioritising the building of a sense of organic community, rather than the solving of practical policy issues. All these perspectives — many at odds with Australian thinking — would need to be navigated in revising the international rules system.

The third message in the commentaries is that there is suspicion in Asia about the origins and purposes of the current RBO. Although certain aspects of the order date back to 17th-century Treaty of Westphalia (which set the framework for the modern states system) and earlier, post-World War 2 rule making is constantly highlighted. A Vietnamese commentator says the RBO was “guided by liberal and internationalist beliefs shared among political elites in Western countries” – and designed to “counter assumed challenges from socialist countries” and “nationalist states elsewhere”, as well as “isolationist tendencies in the US”. In the view of another commentator, the RBO invokes the “US-led Western liberal order”, with such “core ideas” as “democracy, respect for human rights, free and open trade,

responsible government, sovereign equality of nations, rule of law, and universal applicability of international law.” What is now necessary is to involve “non-Western states into the revisioning process” to “increase the RBO’s legitimacy”.

The fourth message is that not only Western but all major powers provoke distrust. A rising power such as China is seen as having a right to engage in rule-making – especially as its leaders believe China was excluded in the past. The Vietnam essay, however, says the two biggest powers, “in accelerating their competition, undermine the global order by flouting existing rules – withdrawing from or abusing multilateral institutions, paralysing international cooperation, and intensifying divides within the international system”. For this reason, several commentaries suggest smaller and middle powers have a special role.

These countries, as a Philippines essay points out, have a “distinct interest in becoming ‘stabilisers’ and ‘legitimisers’ of world order.” Not having “the advantage of superior force” they “favour negotiation and cooperation”. Smaller powers in Asia also have a track record, having been “at the core of the multi-layered web of regional governance rules and institutions.” Australia, of course, also has experience of rule-making. For instance, in establishing the United Nations in the 1940s, Australian officials were mediators in advocating the aspirations of smaller nations against the major powers and have contributed since to such other areas as the Chemical Weapons Convention, the WTO and the Antarctic Treaty. Could Australia today mediate between the major Western powers and a range of Asian aspirations?

The fifth area of advice in the commentaries concerns how a process of rules revision might proceed. Australia has clearly signalled its willingness to consider change. But any state wishing to play a part in the process would need to focus on trust-building and multilateral cooperation. Such states should avoid seeming to operate on behalf of a single major power – and must be careful to ‘walk the talk’, acting themselves in line with the rules they advocate. It is especially important to recognise the frustrations about process — as well as rules content — operating in the Asian

region, even when these frustrations seem ill-founded.

Some rules differences would be essentially technical – and ought to be easy to reconcile. Others are rooted in deep cultural or civilisational contrasts. Anxiety about liberal individualism, for instance, is sometimes evident in countries which prioritise a communitarian social vision – and this can lead to confrontation in defining human rights principles.

In dealing with the reality of ruling elites, one way through this — some commentators suggest — might be to separate out the ‘liberal’ elements from the RBO and concentrate only on state-to-state relations. Such a narrowed-down RBO — in the words of one contributor — might focus largely on “sovereignty and territorial integrity, observance of international law and freedom of navigation and overflight, and peaceful resolution of disputes without resorting to use or threat of force.” The problem, so a Japanese commentator explains, is that in the “age of globalisation, in which nations become increasingly interdependent — and money, people, goods, and information moved increasingly across national borders — the differences in the domestic institutions and rules of each country [have become] a greater political point of contention.” Also, the rules situation becomes increasingly complex in dealing with such new areas as cyber space and outer space – here (perhaps more than most areas) deliberation must take into account “the concern of domestic players and stakeholders as well as small-and-medium-sized states.”

The internal arrangements of states, that is to say, cannot be ignored – and this adds to the challenge of RBO revision. On the other hand, the most encouraging advice in these commentaries concerns the possibility of identifying and building on successful rules codes. Terrorism reporting, for instance, is now mandatory – and the United Nations Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee (CTC) can be a model for implementing the reporting of a disease outbreak and insuring access for the World Health Organisation (WHO). The failure by a state to report a disease outbreak or to allow fact-finding missions — so a commentary from American University

in Washington argues — could be “treated as being equivalent to aggression.” Also, global cooperation in the fight against drug syndicates is a model of “relative success, largely because there is a consensus on the outcomes and fairness in achieving outcomes”.

One final piece of advice concerns the importance of flexibility – the “willingness to be content with arrangements that deliver a workable degree of order”.

RBO deliberations should not become opportunities merely “to complain about the behaviour of other states”. Over the last decade or so, the world can be seen as “returning to a more historically normal period of a divided and contested international order”.

With these comments in mind, the point should be made that in Asian regionalism the deliberation itself matters. Some Australian analysts ridicule what they call ‘talk-shop’ regionalism. But patient dialogue can build a sense of community and a type of procedural order – quite apart from the rules achievements gained in the final signing-off of a legalistic code. In this culture of negotiation, the symbolism of listening and compromise can matter as much as the acts themselves. In a regional RBO dialogue, Australia will inevitably wish to defend aspects of the current rules system, pointing out that they have gained wide acceptance and brought tangible benefits well beyond the Western sphere. But as our Foreign Minister has indicated, we would also listen to suggestions as to how the RBO might evolve.

Given the Australian government’s stated desire to play a role in “shaping” our “strategic environment”, it is better to be inside not outside the ‘conversation of the region’ – and the topic of the Rules-Based Order provides an opportunity of high value.

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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 –

Ongoing study groups:

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- International Law and Cyberspace
- Rules-Based Order
- Women, Peace and Security
- Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation
- Asia and COVID-19

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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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