



THE BEAR IN THE ROOM: RUSSIA AND THE INDO-PACIFIC



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The department also aims to further mutual understanding and cooperation between Japan and other countries for peace and stability in Asia and in resolving global concerns.

ISAS-SPF Panel Discussion

The Bear in the Room: Russia and the Indo-Pacific

May 2022

Authored by Yogesh Joshi, Ippeita Nishida and Nishant Rajeev

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CONTENTS

Executive Summary	3
Introduction	5
Russia and the Indo-Pacific	13
Perceptions of Russia’s Engagement in the Indo-Pacific	18
Conclusion: Implications for the Regional Actors	33
Appendix 1: About the Authors	36

Executive Summary

The increasing involvement of the European powers, particularly France and Britain, to keep the Indo-Pacific free and open is also a shot in the arm for the American Indo-Pacific strategy.

The fight over the Indo-Pacific is ultimately a battle of allies and partners. Even when the United States (US) and China may be the extant and emerging great powers in the region respectively, the Indo-Pacific's balance of power is contingent upon these actors being able to weave winning coalitions in alignment with the region's other prominent actors. If China's heavy-handedness and overly aggressive posture have forced a reintegration of effort by the members of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad), it is equally a result of endless diplomatic networking by the US. The increasing involvement of the European powers, particularly France and Britain, to keep the Indo-Pacific free and open is also a shot in the arm for the American Indo-Pacific strategy. Finally, the US-led Quad countries have also increasingly pressed upon many Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries to start calling out China's coercive tactics in the region. Even when ASEAN has long resisted both the need and pressure to confront China, persistent pressure from the US and other Quad countries has forced some ASEAN countries to abandon their strictly neutralist positioning. The grand coalition of forces, which the US diplomacy is accumulating, is a major challenge facing Chinese decision-makers. Not without reason, therefore, partnerships like the Quad and greater participation of the European countries in the affairs of the Indo-Pacific have come under severe criticism from Beijing.

However, as an alignment of the Indo-Pacific's maritime democracies is strengthening, so is a counter coalition in the form of Eurasia's continental autocracies. Russia's soft entente with China is the most considerable boost to China's diplomacy in recent times. Sanctioned by the West, Moscow finds in Beijing a ready ally that can help sustain the Russian economy through the export of raw materials and military technology and a diplomatic partner in the ideological struggle against Western liberal democracies. Notwithstanding the economic and domestic policy requirements, the growing Sino-Russian entente augments Beijing's geopolitical heft. Under the leadership of President Vladimir Putin, Russia's resurgent geopolitics has pivoted towards Asia. Russia's eastward gaze not only attests to the geo-economic and

geopolitical rise of Asia in global politics but is also reflective of a more profound realisation in Moscow that its own economic and security interests are deeply intertwined with the region's future. For the first time in its history, Russia is becoming an Asian power. Therefore, Putin has, with valid reasons, identified China, India, ASEAN and Japan as the most critical targets of Russian foreign policy.

For the first time in its history, Russia is becoming an Asian power.

Russian foreign policy has grave consequences for the emerging balance of power in the Indo-Pacific. First, it provides a counter coalition to the evolving alignment between the Indo-Pacific states in managing China's rise. Second, Russia's bilateral relations with specific Quad countries such as Japan and India can drive a wedge within the emerging Quad coalition. Lastly, Russia can render Europe's participation in the Indo-Pacific deeply problematic by raising the tempo of its politico-military coercion in Eastern Europe.

To understand Russia's emerging role in the Indo-Pacific and its impact on the policies of the Quad and the European countries in the region, the Institute of South Asian Studies at the National University of Singapore and Sasakawa Peace Foundation organised a panel discussion to examine Moscow's approach towards the region. The panellists explored the following questions: What are Russia's primary interests and strategic concerns in the Indo-Pacific, and how does it aim to secure them? In the face of significant realignments of security partnerships in the Indo-Pacific, what are Russia's strategic choices? What are the expectations and fears in India and Japan over Russia's approach to the Indo-Pacific and its growing entente with China? How do the European states involved in the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific view Russia's contributions to the balance of power in the region? The presentations and discussions during the panel discussion are compiled and analysed in this Special Report.

Introduction

The partnership envisioned by Abe was built upon China's fundamental weakness: its continental outlook and the lack of allies in the region.

In 2007, then Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe passionately canvassed for an arc of democracies in the Indo-Pacific to come together, resulting in the Quad comprising India, Japan, Australia and the US. The Quad's principal advantage lay in its potential to bring the Indo-Pacific's maritime democracies together to provide for democratic freedom and the rule of law, and act as a hedge against future imbalances of power resulting from China's rise. The focus of the Quad was entirely on managing China's rise and the challenges it posed to the liberal order, which had been primarily responsible for Asia's growth and prosperity. The partnership envisioned by Abe was built upon China's fundamental weakness: its continental outlook and the lack of allies in the region. Hemmed in by the first island chain on the West and Russian interests and influence in North and Central Asia, the promise of the Quad was quite potent. In recent years, after almost a decade of procrastination, the Quad has been revitalised and it is now on the path to fulfilling its promises.

The fight over the Indo-Pacific is ultimately a battle of allies and partners. Even when the US and China may be the extant and emerging great powers in the region respectively, the Indo-Pacific's balance of power is contingent upon how these actors are able to weave winning coalitions in alignment with the region's other prominent actors. If China's heavy-handedness and overly aggressive posture have forced a reintegration of effort by the members of the Quad, it is equally a result of endless diplomatic networking by the US. The increasing involvement of the European powers, particularly France and Britain, to keep the Indo-Pacific free and open is also a shot in the arm for the American Indo-Pacific strategy. Finally, the US-led Quad countries have also increasingly pressed upon many ASEAN members to start calling out China's coercive tactics in the region. Even when ASEAN has long resisted both the need and pressure to confront China, the growing intensity of Sino-US competition may render ASEAN's neutralist positioning unviable in the long run. The grand coalition of forces, which the US diplomacy is accumulating, is the major challenge facing Chinese decision-makers. Not without reason, therefore, coalitions

like the Quad and greater participation of the European countries in the affairs of the Indo-Pacific have come under severe criticism from Beijing.

However, in the last 15 years of the Quad's existence, the most momentous shift for the Indo-Pacific's balance of power has been the emerging entente between Russia and China. Russia has found itself on the opposite side of the Quad, leading to a counter-coalition by Eurasia's continental powers. The announcement of AUKUS by the US, Australia and the United Kingdom (UK) has only provided further momentum to such balancing and counter-balancing coalitions. Much of this shift in Moscow's policy engenders out of the complexity of US-Russia relations. The increasing alignment between Eurasia's continental giants was in ample demonstration during the recent visit by Putin to Beijing at the time of the winter Olympic game in February 2022. The joint statement released after the meeting between Putin and China's President Xi Jinping has heralded a new phase of geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific.

Russia has found itself on the opposite side of the Quad, leading to a counter-coalition by Eurasia's continental powers.

The target of Xi's China and Putin's Russia is the US-led liberal world order and the increasing alignment between like-minded states in the Indo-Pacific, which both Moscow and Beijing find unpalatable to their national interests. They seek first to legitimise their quasi-authoritarian internal governance structures, as the joint statement argued:

“There is no one-size-fits-all template to guide countries in establishing democracy. A nation can choose such forms and methods of implementing democracy that would best suit its particular state, based on its social and political system, historical background, traditions, and unique cultural characteristics. It is only up to the people of the country to decide whether their state is a democratic one.”¹

¹ “Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development”, President of Russia, 4 February 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770>.

Second, they aim to settle their territorial ambitions in Europe and Asia, if necessary, by the use of force. Putin affirmed Russia's "support for the 'One China' principle, confirms that Taiwan is an inalienable part of China, and opposes any forms of independence of Taiwan."² China has reciprocated similarly in support of Russian interests in Ukraine and Eastern Europe:

"...the sides oppose further enlargement of North Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO] and call on the North Atlantic Alliance to abandon its ideologised Cold War approaches, to respect the sovereignty, security and interests of other countries, the diversity of their civilisational, cultural and historical backgrounds, and to exercise a fair and objective attitude towards the peaceful development of other States."³

Whereas China seeks primacy in Asia, Russia wants to reclaim its European sphere of influence and buffer zones.

Lastly, they aim to challenge the US hegemony and carve their spheres of influence against the ubiquitous but prickly American presence. Whereas China seeks primacy in Asia, Russia wants to reclaim its European sphere of influence and buffer zones. Calling the "inter-State relations between Russia and China are superior to political and military alliances of the Cold War era", the emerging Sino-Russia entente aims to build "a new kind of relationship between world powers on the basis of mutual respect, peaceful coexistence and mutually beneficial cooperation."⁴

Resistance to the Indo-Pacific and the Quad has emerged as a central intersection of Russian and Chinese interests. First, they have declined to accept the reality of the Indo-Pacific, which they argue provides the US power and legitimacy to redefine the region's geopolitics to engender a balance of power against China's increasing influence in the region. Rather, both have called for "consistent efforts to build an equitable, open and inclusive security system in the Asia-Pacific region that is not directed against third countries and that promotes

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

peace, stability and prosperity.”⁵ Second, Moscow and Beijing share the fear of the transformation of the Quad into a potential military alliance – an Asian NATO. They have made evident their opposition “to [the] formation of closed bloc structures and opposing camps in the Asia-Pacific region.”⁶ Other US-led coalitions such as AUKUS have left Moscow and Beijing “seriously concerned” as they feel that these arrangements undermine their nuclear deterrent and engender strategic instability.

Ever since Russia’s isolation from the West following the 2014 annexation of Crimea, Russia’s soft entente with China has been the most considerable boost to Russian diplomacy in recent times. Sanctioned by the West, Moscow finds in Beijing a ready ally that can help sustain the Russian economy through the export of raw materials and military technology and a diplomatic partner in the ideological struggle against Western liberal democracies. Notwithstanding the economic and domestic policy requirements, the growing Sino-Russian entente augments Beijing’s geopolitical heft. Under Putin’s leadership, Russia’s resurgent geopolitics has pivoted towards Asia. Russia’s eastward gaze not only attests to the geoeconomics and geopolitical rise of Asia in global politics but is also reflective of a more profound realisation in Moscow that its own economic and security interests are deeply intertwined with the region’s future. For the first time in its history, Russia is becoming an Asian power. Not without reason, therefore, Putin has identified China, India, ASEAN and Japan as the most critical targets of Russian foreign policy.

Notwithstanding the economic and domestic policy requirements, the growing Sino-Russian entente augments Beijing’s geopolitical heft.

Analysts have long hypothesised how the emerging contours of Russian foreign will policy have grave consequences for the emerging balance of power in the Indo-Pacific. First, it provides a counter-coalition to the evolving alignment between the Indo-Pacific states in managing China’s rise. Suppose Beijing supports Russian revanchism in Europe and Moscow reciprocates to Beijing’s revisionism in Taiwan and the South China Sea. In that case, the two Eurasian powers will

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

act as force multipliers in each other's foreign and national security policy. Their combined economic and military power has the potential to top the balance of power against the US and its allies.

Second, Russia's bilateral relations with specific Quad countries such as Japan and India can drive a wedge within the emerging Quad coalition. Tokyo has tried assiduously to settle the territorial dispute with Moscow. On the other hand, India has maintained its defence and strategic relationship intact. Russian actions in Europe, its support for China's expansionist agenda and its adversarial relationship with the US will force India and Japan to make a tough call vis-à-vis their participation in the Quad.

The Russian-Ukrainian crisis and Moscow's revanchism along Eastern Europe will divide American focus and capabilities.

Third, Russia can render Europe's involvement in the Indo-Pacific deeply problematic by raising the tempo of its politico-military coercion in Eastern Europe and submarine activities in the European waters. Already, European powers are divided over the form and level of their commitment to the region. For many Eastern Europeans, Russia poses an existential threat. Western European powers aim to focus on the China challenge. Last but not most importantly, just when the American strategic focus had shifted to contain China's rise, Russian interventions in Europe have threatened to take the wind out of America's Indo-Pacific voyage. The Russian-Ukrainian crisis and Moscow's revanchism along Eastern Europe will divide American focus and capabilities.

Such fears have sadly turned valid with Putin's invasion of Ukraine. Just as the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) met for a second emergency session on 23 February 2022 to discuss the ongoing crisis, Putin ordered Russian armed forces to launch a "special military operation" in Ukraine. As Putin outlined in a speech from the Kremlin, Russia's aims were Ukraine's demilitarisation and denazification, a euphemism for regime change in Kyiv.⁷ Intelligence reports suggest that Putin received tacit approval from Xi on the condition that Russia

⁷ "No other option": Excerpts of Putin's speech declaring war", *Al Jazeera*, 24 February 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/24/putins-speech-declaring-war-on-ukraine-translated-excerpts>.

delays its assault until the end of the Winter Olympics in Beijing.⁸ If these reports are true, the Sino-Russian entente is not a theoretical possibility; the alliance between Eurasia's continental authoritarians is already a reality.

The Ukrainian crisis has significant implications for the Indo-Pacific. First, in an era where China is the primary American adversary and the US' moment of unipolarity is fast eroding, an active European theatre risks dividing America's limited energy and resources against two major revisionist powers in Eurasia. The Russian-Ukrainian crisis has forced the US to strengthen the NATO alliance, even when European economic giants like Germany have, until recently, contributed very little to NATO's military resources. US President Joe Biden has dispatched trip-wire troops to forward NATO states in Eastern Europe and the Baltics. However, the real problem for Biden would be in the post-conflict scenario, especially after the Russian occupation, where Ukraine sees a significant uptick in guerrilla warfare, and Ukraine's NATO neighbours support insurgencies against the pro-Russia government in Kyiv. That would render the whole NATO-Russia border extremely active and volatile, sensitive at any time to escalation. Such a scenario poses the severe risk of entrapping the US military into the adventures of its NATO allies in Eastern Europe.

Russian actions will help Beijing in the short term. First, they will draw global attention to the European theatre and distract from the Indo-Pacific. The more the US invests in NATO and remains engulfed in the crisis with Russia, the more would be the freedom for China to manoeuvre in the Indo-Pacific. The second scenario, though unlikely, would involve the West seeking Beijing's assistance to pressure Moscow diplomatically in the United Nations (UN) and by participating in the economic sanctions imposed so far. It may provide Beijing with a shot at recalibrating its highly competitive relationship with the US. Third, Putin's actions have forced him into a strategic corner. Moscow, by default, has no other option but to cling to Beijing's coattail. Fourth,

The more the US invests in NATO and remains engulfed in the crisis with Russia, the more would be the freedom for China to manoeuvre in the Indo-Pacific.

⁸ Edward Wong and Julian E Barnes, "China Asked Russia to Delay Ukraine War Until After Olympics, U.S. Officials Say", *New York Times*, 2 March 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/02/us/politics/russia-ukraine-china.html>.

the US and NATO's inability to intervene in Ukraine may create doubts among American allies in the Indo-Pacific about the credibility of the US to follow through with its security guarantees in the region. Lastly, the Russia-Ukraine crisis has also created a significant wedge within the Quad. Given India's close political and defence relationship with Moscow and its inclination to stop Russia's full embrace of China, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government has abstained from criticising Putin in the UNSC and the UN General Assembly. India's hesitancy has resulted in significant heartburn among its Indo-Pacific allies, even when they have restrained themselves from publicly calling India out for its silence in the face of blatant violation of international law.

China's perceived support for Russia will fortify the authoritarian axis in Eurasia, and it will also entail greater hostility against authoritarianism in democracies globally.

Yet, the Russian-induced Europe crisis would galvanise resistance against China in the Indo-Pacific in the long term. First, the Russian invasion will finally force the European powers to reinvest in their military capabilities. It will lend greater credibility to NATO and encourage more significant contributions by the European powers to the defence of Europe. China's perceived support for Russia will fortify the authoritarian axis in Eurasia, and it will also entail greater hostility against authoritarianism in democracies globally. Second, the fundamental contradictions in the Indo-Pacific's Chinese and American national interests will not evaporate. Insofar as Xi's ambitions in extending Chinese influence – coupled with Beijing's bid to replace American primacy in the region – remain unchanged, Sino-US competition will only intensify. Third, the Russian invasion of Ukraine will also galvanise the region's middle powers to invest further in their military capabilities, both conventional and nuclear. Japan was one of the first Quad country to impose heavy sanctions on Russia, tightening the US-Japan bilateral alliance. As Robert Ward of the International Institute for Strategic Studies argues, Tokyo will now “table key economic security bill imminently” and “revise its National Security Strategy [NSS].”⁹ Japan is currently reviewing its 2013 NSS, including the policy option to acquire pre-emptive strike capabilities, and the revised NSS may witness a Japanese strategy devoid of past taboos on the use of military power.

⁹ Robert Ward (@RobertAlanWard), “Ukraine crisis will surely also accelerate Japan's own security reforms given its concerns about...”, Twitter, 25 February 2022, 2:51 PM, <https://twitter.com/RobertAlanWard/status/1497101894975643648>.

India's stoic silence notwithstanding, its public position has increasingly become more sympathetic to Ukraine, repeatedly calling for respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity. The invasion by Russia will force India to decouple its defence dependence on Moscow. Modi has already emphasised greater indigenisation amidst the Russia-Ukraine crisis. In recent years, Russia has become a greater liability than an asset in India's China policy. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has forced the Indo-Pacific countries to seriously mull over Moscow's influence in the emerging geopolitics of the region. In an emergency meeting of the Quad countries during the ongoing crisis, the members underlined their resolve to keep the Indo-Pacific free from such disruptions. The AUKUS powers have also expedited greater cooperation to "strengthen intelligence and security ties."¹⁰ Lastly, Russia's blatant violation of Ukrainian sovereignty may accelerate nuclear acquisition by the local powers. In a recent survey, the South Koreans have overwhelmingly supported the acquisition of atomic weapons.¹¹ Strategists in the US are now arguing to put atomic weapons at the forefront of America's deterrent strategy vis-à-vis China. The Russian aggression has also rekindled the debate within Japan to revisit its anti-nuclear weapons stance. Abe has publicly called for the Japanese decision-makers not to rule out the policy option of nuclear sharing.¹²

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has forced the Indo-Pacific countries to seriously mull over Moscow's influence in the emerging geopolitics of the region.

This Special Report will delve into Russian interests and policies in the Indo-Pacific, especially in regard to its approach to the Quad. It will first focus on Russian interests, objectives and strategies in the Indo-Pacific. Next, it will discuss the perceptions of Russian involvement in the region through the lens of three major actors: India, Japan and Europe. Lastly, it will elaborate on the implications of Russia's Indo-Pacific strategy on the evolving geopolitics of the region.

10 James Paterson, "Visit to AUKUS partners to strengthen intelligence and security ties", Media Statement, 24 February 2022, <https://www.senatorpaterson.com.au/news/media-statement-visit-to-aukus-partners-to-strengthen-intelligence-and-security-ties>.

11 Mitch Shin, "Nearly Three-Quarters of South Koreans Support Nuclear Weapons Development", *The Diplomat*, 22 February 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/02/nearly-three-quarters-of-south-koreans-support-nuclear-weapons-development/>.

12 "Ex-PM Abe says Japan should discuss nuclear sharing arrangement", *Japan Today*, 28 February 2022, <https://japantoday.com/category/politics/ex-pm-abe-says-japan-should-discuss-nuclear-sharing-arrangement>.

Russia and the Indo-Pacific

China's strong economic growth and the parallel rise of the Southeast Asian economies presented Russia with new opportunities.

Moscow's recent interest in maritime Asia can be traced back to 2012 when Putin launched Russia's own "Pivot to Asia". Russian Prime Minister Dimitri Medvedev called for Russia to play a more significant role in fostering economic integration between Russia's Far Eastern Region and Asia-Pacific economies. Russia's 2013 Foreign Policy Concept stressed a global power shift from Europe to the Asia-Pacific and underscored its role as a key transit country between the two continental landmasses. During this time, Russia's interest in the Asia-Pacific was driven primarily by economics. The 2008 financial crisis highlighted the West's economic fragility. China's strong economic growth and the parallel rise of the Southeast Asian economies presented Russia with new opportunities.

Furthermore, economic engagement with the Asia-Pacific could secure Russia's eastern flank and promote development. As scholar Maria Shagina noted then, "The logic behind Russia's rapprochement with Asia was based on the complementarity of their economies."¹³ Being rich in energy supplies like natural gas and oil, Russia is well-positioned to supply a resource-hungry Asia-Pacific. In return, Russia could benefit from accessing new investment sources and acquiring advanced technology.

Russia's Asian embrace was accelerated by geostrategic considerations emerging out of Russia's deteriorating relationship with the West. In 2014, Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula from Ukraine and later began backing the separatists in the Donbas region of Ukraine. Russia also intervened decisively to support Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad's regime. All these actions militated against Western interests and resulted in economic sanctions being imposed on the Russian economy. Given its isolation from the West, its current engagement

¹³ Maria Shagina, "Russia's Pivot to Asia: Between Rhetoric and Substance", *Orbis* 64, no.3 (2020), p. 448. For an overview, also see Eugene Rumer, Richard Sokolsky and Aleksandar Vladicic, "Russia in the Asia-Pacific: Less Than Meets the Eye", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 2020, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/SokolskyRumer_Asia-Pacific_FINAL.pdf; and Bobo Lo and Fiona Hill, "Putin's Pivot: Why Russia is Looking East", Brookings, 31 July 2013, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/putins-pivot-why-russia-is-looking-east/>.

with the Asia-Pacific is being driven by strategic necessities resulting from a changing balance of power in the region.

Russia has viewed the Indo-Pacific concept as an artificially imposed US construct meant to bolster the US' alliance system in the region. In particular, the Indo-Pacific concept is seen in Russia as an attempt to harken back to the days of the Cold War dominated by traditional alliance systems centred around the US. The US-backed alliance network could reinforce American primacy and affect the global balance of power away from multipolarity, a key Russian objective. Two recent coalitions – the Quad and the AUKUS partnership – highlight Russian anxieties. Moscow views the Quad as a mechanism by Washington to bolster its alliance with Tokyo and Canberra and bring Delhi into the fold of the US alliance system. Russia has watched the evolution of the Quad with severe concern and anxiety. The reemergence of the Quad began with working-level talks in 2017 but is now institutionalised at the head-of-state level with a comprehensive order-building agenda covering areas like technology, climate change and global health.

The US-backed alliance network could reinforce American primacy and affect the global balance of power away from multipolarity, a key Russian objective.

Russian perceptions of the Quad are of a closed-door mechanism exclusive to the Indo-Pacific's maritime democracies. During the Russia-India-China (RIC) meeting at Delhi in December 2017, Russia's Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov stated that "sustainable security architecture in the region cannot be achieved through closed block arrangements..."¹⁴ He reiterated this sentiment at the Raisina Dialogue in 2020 where he stressed that the Indo-Pacific concept was a mechanism to contain the rise of China.¹⁵ Underpinning the progress of the Quad is a burgeoning partnership between the US and India. The two countries have made significant progress in advancing an economic relationship and a politico-military dialogue. Both countries have instituted a 2+2 dialogue between their foreign

14 Harsh Pant, "Fault lines in the Russia-India-China trilateral meeting", Observer Research Foundation, 14 December 2017, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/fault-lines-in-the-russia-india-china-trilateral-meeting/>.

15 Shubhajit Roy, "India Object of Anti-China Policy of the West, Russia Minister Says", *The Indian Express*, 10 December 2020, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-object-of-anti-china-policy-of-the-west-russia-minister-says-7098782/>.

and defence ministers. In 2020, the defence relationship between the two countries reached a significant milestone when India signed the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement. With this agreement in place, India had signed onto all four foundational agreements that the US otherwise has had only with its closest partners and allies. As a result of these developments, the US has emerged as one of India's primary defence suppliers looking to displace Russia from its traditional position.

Some in Russian policy-making circles are also concerned that in the future, both the Quad and AUKUS can develop into an Asian NATO.

Russia has also kept a watchful eye on the AUKUS agreement. While the alliance may not affect the immediate balance of power, especially in light of the fallout with France, it does have long-term consequences. Australia's acquisition of nuclear submarines can give it the ability to operate closer to Russian waters, especially in Northeast Asia, and lead to a more prominent presence in the Indo-Pacific.¹⁶ Some in Russian policy-making circles are also concerned that in the future, both the Quad and AUKUS can develop into an Asian NATO.¹⁷ These developments have driven Russia to be involved in the Indo-Pacific. However, its approach is more *ad hoc* and not guided by an overarching strategy.

In the Indo-Pacific, Russia's default strategy is one of aligning with China. However, as challenges continue to exist between the two, Russia has also sought to diversify its relationships in Asia among middle powers like India and Japan, and institutions like ASEAN. Thus, its strategy is seen as a mix of balancing and hedging to maintain autonomy from the West and China.

Russia and China began to develop a positive tract for their relationship in the late 2000s. Their mutual suspicion of unchecked American power and fear of colour-revolutions that induce regime change led them to develop some areas of geopolitical convergence. Both countries sought a multipolar world order to hedge against the US-led liberal order. This political convergence led to a growing

¹⁶ Andrey Kortunov, "Should Russia Be Worried by the New AUKUS Alliance?", Carnegie Moscow, 29 September 2021, <https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/85451>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

security partnership. The Sino-Russian defence relationship has grown as a consequence. China procured the S-400 missile defence system from Russia in 2014 and Su-35 fighter aircraft in 2015. In 2019, Russia and China were jointly developing an antimissile early-warning system and involved in a top-secret submarine project.¹⁸ Sino-Russian cooperation extends beyond arms sales as well. Both countries have been conducting regular military exercises and joint patrols.

In July 2019, the People's Liberation Army Air Force and the Russian Air Force conducted their first joint air patrol. Two Chinese H-6K and two Russian Tu-95 bombers flew into the overlapping Japanese and South Korean Air Defence Identification Zones. A similar exercise was conducted in December 2020, wherein two Tu-95s, joined by four H-6Ks, flew through the Sea of Japan.¹⁹ The two countries' navies also conducted a joint naval patrol in October 2021 when a group of 10 vessels sailed through the Tsugaru Strait along Japan's coast.²⁰ The patrol was seen as a response to the declaration of the AUKUS alliance. Both countries have also been expanding the scope of their cooperation in military exercises. Media reports indicate that recent activities have focused on improving interoperability and independent operational proficiency. Military drills conducted in August 2021 were the first to use a joint Sino-Russian command-and-control set-up, highlighting an increased focus on joint operations. Such security convergence complements the defence partnership. Russia, for its part, has chosen to recognise Taiwan as a part of mainland China and reiterated the 'One China' policy. In contrast, China has extended diplomatic support to Russia over its crisis with Ukraine.

Both countries have also been expanding the scope of their cooperation in military exercises.

Russia is not putting all its eggs in the Chinese basket despite their growing bonhomie. It has chosen to expand engagement with India and the Southeast Asian countries. The Russia-ASEAN summit in

18 Brett Forrest, Ann M Simmons and Chao Deng, "China and Russia Military Cooperation Raises Prospect of New Challenge to American Power", *Wall Street Journal*, 2 January 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-russia-america-military-exercises-weapons-war-xi-putin-biden-11641146041>.

19 Richard Weitz, "Assessing Chinese-Russian Military Exercises: Past Progress and Future Trends", CSIS Report, 9 July 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/assessing-chinese-russian-military-exercises-past-progress-and-future-trends>.

20 "Russian, Chinese warships hold first joint patrols in the Pacific", *Reuters*, 24 October 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/russian-chinese-warships-hold-first-joint-patrols-pacific-2021-10-23/>.

October 2021 saw some convergence between the two sides. At the meeting, the ASEAN countries reiterated their interest in interacting within the Moscow-led 'Greater Eurasian Partnership' framework. Russia acknowledged the importance of the ASEAN Indo-Pacific Outlook and the importance of ASEAN centrality. Both sides also held their first-ever joint naval drills in December 2021. Although limited in scale and military interoperability, the naval manoeuvres were held off North Sumatra along the Malacca Straits, a strategic shipping lane.

In December 2021, India and Russia held an annual summit against the backdrop of a global pandemic and launched a newly established the 2+2 dialogue of their defence and foreign ministers.

In addition to ASEAN as an institution, Russia has sought to deepen its defence relationship with individual Southeast Asian countries like Vietnam, Indonesia and the Philippines. It continues to be a major defence exporter to the region.²¹ India, however, continues to be Russia's main partner in the Indo-Pacific.²² In December 2021, India and Russia held an annual summit against the backdrop of a global pandemic and launched a newly established the 2+2 dialogue of their defence and foreign ministers. While the bilateral relationship has lost some steam, military cooperation has been proceeding steadily. India has opted to stick to the S-400 deal despite the threat of the US' Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act. The two countries also agreed to sell defence equipment to third countries in Southeast Asia, especially the Brahmos missile. The Philippines will be the first country to receive the missile, while Vietnam has indicated interest.

For Russia, the Indo-Pacific is an American construct imposed on the region to reinforce a Cold-War security architecture. To balance a growing gap in military power in the area, Moscow has sought a close military relationship with Beijing. However, Russia recognises the need to maintain room to manoeuvre in the geopolitical arena. Thus, it has also sought to engage the middle powers in Asia through defence ties parallelly.

21 Ian Storey, "Russia's Defence Diplomacy in Southeast Asia: A Tenuous Lead in Arms Sales but Lagging in Other Areas", ISEAS Perspective 2021, no. 33 (18 March 2021), https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/ISEAS_Perspective_2021_33.pdf.

22 Aleksei Zakharov, "India-Russia Summit: Implications for the Indo-Pacific Region", ISAS, Brief No.885, 16 December 2021, <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/india-russia-summit-implications-for-the-indo-pacific-region/>.

Perceptions of Russia's Indo-Pacific Engagement

Russian involvement in the Indo-Pacific can pose severe challenges to the Quad. Unlike its approach to China, which all the Quad members recognise as the long-term threat, views within the Quad are divided on Russia. Washington and Moscow have seen a steady deterioration in their relationship since the late 2000s when Russia invaded Georgia. Similarly, Australia has also supported the US in its condemnation of Russian aggression. However, India and Japan have followed a more balanced approach. Due to the unique circumstances of each country, India and Japan have an interest in maintaining a stable relationship with Russia. This may lead to disagreements within the Quad on engaging with or reacting to Russian activities in the Indo-Pacific. While the Quad will likely remain a stable grouping with a unified purpose, the questions arising from Russian activities can drive a wedge between the members on specific policies. On the other hand, Europe does not see Russia as a prominent Indo-Pacific actor. While European influence in the Indo-Pacific is not as vast as that of the Quad, it aims to emerge as an essential factor in the region. Russia will remain an Atlantic and continental threat for the European countries rather than an Indo-Pacific one.

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Japan

Japan's recent active engagement with Russia dates back to the beginning of the Abe era. Upon returning to the office of prime minister in 2012, Abe made clear his desire to resolve the territorial dispute between Japan and Russia, ink a peace treaty and improve the overall bilateral relationship on his first day in office. Apart from being personally motivated to resolve the dispute, there was strategic logic behind his effort. Since 2010, Japan's security environment had significantly deteriorated with North Korea ramping up its nuclear programme and increasing the pace of its nuclear missile testing. The latter had conducted two nuclear tests by 2012, and another followed in 2013. However, Chinese belligerent rise caused the most concern for Japan. Tensions were rising in the East China Sea as Beijing

increased provocative activities around the Senkaku islands. To deny the territorial claim by China and avoid unintentional escalation, the Japanese government nationalised the Senkaku islands in 2012, which drew a string of condemnation from China. China stepped up its grey zone activities through its maritime militia. Chinese fighter aircrafts began overflights of the airspace around the Senkaku Islands.

While Japan was not in open confrontation with Russia at the time, the prospect of deepening Sino-Russian cooperation was worrisome for Tokyo.

In 2013, China declared an Air Defence Identification Zone over much of the East China Sea, including the islands. Against this deteriorating security environment, Japan sought to improve its security position by improving its relationship with Russia. Abe engaged Putin and sought a peaceful settlement of the Japan-Russia boundary dispute over the unlawfully annexed Northern islands (called Kuril Islands by Russia). Furthermore, Abe hoped that engaging Moscow would stave off a Sino-Russian entente. While Japan was not in open confrontation with Russia at the time, the prospect of deepening Sino-Russian cooperation was worrisome for Tokyo. Russia could provide the Chinese military with sophisticated equipment, and joint military exercises could enhance the capability of the Chinese military. Moreover, Japan's Self-Defense Forces' operation posture has shifted heavily to the south to counter the threats from China. As a country whose territory stretches from north to south, having two theatres to defend in different directions is extremely difficult. Coordination between the Chinese and Russian militaries in times of conflict or through grey zone operations would present insurmountable challenges for Japan.

The Abe administration hoped to complicate the Sino-Russian relationship by politically engaging Russia and developing economic cooperation. On the economic front, the American production of shale gas and shale oil from mid-2000 was a major factor in depressing global fossil energy prices. Such a downturn in the global energy market would only exacerbate Russian reliance on the Chinese economy. Offering economic cooperation in Russia's underdeveloped region in the Far East and a potential increase in gas import would create some strategic space for Japan. For Russia, engagement with Japan fits well into Putin's "Pivot to Asia" policy. He saw Japan as one of the potential partners to help develop the Eastern Russian

frontier,²³ and he attempted to expand bilateral economic relations to increase investment and boost trade.

Japan's rapprochement with Russia began shortly after both Abe and Putin returned to power in 2012. To catalyse the rapprochement, Abe made an early trip to Moscow in April 2013; he became the first Japanese prime minister to visit Moscow in over a decade. In the same year, the government-to-government engagement was institutionalised with the 2+2 meetings between Japanese and Russian foreign and defence ministers. Abe's emphasis on building ties with Russia was phenomenal. By early 2016, Abe visited Russia 11 times and met Putin on 13 other occasions. Bilateral economic ties improved steadily, and bilateral trade exceeded US\$35 billion (S\$47.5 billion) for the first time in 2013; this represented an increase of 3.3 per cent from 2012. Most importantly, the two sides began discussions on a peace treaty. At the Moscow summit in April 2013, the two leaders issued a joint statement to this effect that stated, "We have instructed our foreign ministries to step up contacts on working out mutually acceptable options [for a peace treaty]."²⁴

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However, the relationship took a downturn shortly after the Russian annexation of Crimea. Under pressure from Washington, the Western countries sanctioned Russia and Japan followed suit. Although Japan's actions against Russia were largely symbolic and Tokyo was initially reluctant to impose sanctions, the bilateral relationship had already been impacted. As a result, Putin's visit to Japan scheduled for the autumn of 2014 was postponed and the 2+2 dialogue was suspended.²⁵

In May 2016, Abe made a renewed effort to stabilise the Japan-Russia relationship by meeting with Putin in Sochi; Putin reciprocated this

23 Anna Kireeva, "A New Stage in Russia-Japan Relations: Rapprochement and its Limitations", *Asia-Pacific Review* 26, no.2 (2019), pp. 76-104; Matteo Dian and Anna Kireeva, "Wedge strategies in Russia-Japan relations", *The Pacific Review*, 2021; and Celine Pajon, "Japan-Russia: The limits of strategic rapprochement", *Russie.Nei.Visions, Ifri*, No. 104 (October 2017).

24 James D Brown, "Abe's 2016 plan to break the deadlock in the territorial dispute with Russia", *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 14, no. 4 (2016), pp. 1-26.

25 "Putin may delay Japan visit over Tokyo's Ukraine sanctions - Russian state newspaper", *Reuters*, 11 September 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-russia-japan-putin-idUKKBN0H61B520140911>.

Japan's economic cooperation with Russia targetted several sectors, including energy, logistics, manufacturing industry, digital economy and innovation and urban infrastructure.

gesture by visiting Abe in his hometown of Nagato and at the prime minister office in Tokyo in December.²⁶ In Sochi, Abe suggested that a new approach was required to resolve the territorial dispute.²⁷ Both leaders agreed to facilitate dialogue on a peace treaty and start consultations on joint economic activity on the Northern territories during Putin's visit to Japan in 2016. These personal interventions by Putin and Abe helped reinstitute dialogue between the two countries. As a result, political, security and economic cooperation rekindled. In March 2017, the 2+2 dialogue was restored, and defence exchanges between high-level military officers resumed. Both countries resumed peace talks in 2018 based on the Soviet-Japanese Joint Declaration of 1956. In addition, Japan stepped up its economic cooperation with Russia. Abe proposed an eight-point economic cooperation plan when he visited the Russian coastal city of Vladivostok for the Far East Economic Forum in September 2016.²⁸ In August 2017, the Russia-Japan Investment Foundation was established with a capital of US\$1 billion (S\$1.36 billion). Japan's economic cooperation with Russia targetted several sectors, including energy, logistics, manufacturing industry, digital economy and innovation and urban infrastructure. In December 2016, the Japan Bank for International Cooperation provided a €200 billion (S\$299 billion) credit to the Yamal liquefied natural gas (LNG) project operated by Russia-led Novatek Oil Company. In June 2019, a consortium, including Mitsui & Co. and Japan Oil, Gas and Metals National Corporation, agreed to procure a 10 per cent share in Novatek's project, 'Arctic LNG-2'. This project provides Japan with an alternative source for LNG imports and ensures that Russia's partners in the Arctic are not limited to China.²⁹

Despite the growing bonhomie, the relationship began to lose momentum in 2020. The advent of the COVID-19 global pandemic

26 Kazuhiko Togo, "Japan's Relations with Russia and China and the Implications for the U.S.-Japan Alliance", National Bureau of Asian Research Commentary, 16 May 2018, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/japans-relations-with-russia-and-china-and-the-implications-for-the-u-s-japan-alliance/>.

27 "A solution to the Kuril Islands dispute?", *DW World*, 2 December 2016, <https://www.dw.com/en/a-solution-to-the-kuril-islands-dispute/a-36624291>.

28 James D Brown, "Japan's 'New Approach' to Russia", *The Diplomat*, 18 June 2016, <https://the-diplomat.com/2016/06/japans-new-approach-to-russia/>.

29 Matteo Dian and Anna Kireeva, "Wedge strategies in Russia-Japan relations", op. cit.

resulted in both governments putting their foreign policy on the backburner as they turned inwards to focus on domestic public health concerns. Furthermore, Abe, who invested personally in improving relations with Moscow, resigned in September 2020 amid his deteriorating health. The prime ministers who succeeded him – Yoshihide Suga and then Fumio Kishida – showed little appetite in following the controversial foreign policy approach, especially amid the raging pandemic. Putin’s invasion of Ukraine has proved them right.

In the last decade, Japan has faced Russian military pressure, exacerbated by Russia’s international isolation following its annexation of Crimea. First, Moscow used its geographical proximity to the Sea of Japan and the mainland islands as leverage against the US. Since 2014, the Russian Navy and Air Force have increased deployments in and around Japan’s contiguous waters. The 2021 Japanese Defence White Paper acknowledged “the trend of increasing activity by the Russian armed forces in the vicinity of Japan has shown a recent tendency to deploy the latest equipment in the Far East Region.”³⁰ In February 2022, Japan’s Defence Minister Nobuo Kishi directly linked Russian troubles in Europe to its penchant to raise tensions in the Far East, “Due to the recent movements on the border with Ukraine, we believe that Russia is increasing activity to demonstrate military capabilities both in the West and the East.”³¹ As Tetsuo Kotani notes, in several instances in the past, the Russian and Chinese Air Forces have accidentally or in coordination carried out operations close to Japanese air space simultaneously.³² However, of late, such coordination has become far more explicit. The first joint Sino-Russian air exercises over the Sea of Japan were conducted in July 2019. In December 2020, Russian Tu-95 strategic bombers and Chinese H-6 bombers jointly conducted a long-range patrol starting from the Sea of Japan into the Pacific Ocean. Just after the announcement of AUKUS, a 10-ship armada of Russia’s

Since 2014, the Russian Navy and Air Force have increased deployments in and around Japan’s contiguous waters.

30 “Defence of Japan 2021”, Publications, Ministry of Defence, Government of Japan, https://www.mod.go.jp/en/publ/w_paper/wp2021/DOJ2021_EN_Full.pdf.

31 Nitin J Ticku, “Russia’s Exhaustive Military Drills Raise ‘Alarm Bells’ In Japan; Tokyo Says Moscow Flexing Muscles Amid Ukraine Tensions”, *Eurasian Times*, 15 February 2022 <https://eurasiatimes.com/russias-exhaustive-military-drills-raise-alarm-bells-in-japan/>.

32 Kotani Tetsuo, “The Threat of a Sino-Russian Fleet Circumnavigating Japan: How should Japan respond?”, *The Diplomat*, 14 November 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/11/the-threat-of-a-sino-russian-fleet-circumnavigating-japan/>.

Navy and China's Navy circumnavigated Japan. Given the Japanese policy of claiming only a three-mile territorial sea in the "designated sea areas" of Tsushima Strait, Tsugaru Strait, Soya Strait and the Osumi Strait, Moscow and Beijing have continuously exploited this policy demonstrate combined military presence near to the Japanese shore.³³

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has, once again, emphasised the need to strengthen the deterrence obtained by the Japan-US security treaty through greater military preparedness.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has raised serious alarms within the Japanese defence establishment. Seventy-seven per cent of Japanese believe that the Russian aggression will follow with the Chinese invasion of Taiwan and 61 per cent of the population supports unconditional support for Western sanctions against Russia. Japan moved quickly following the announcements of US sanctions against Russian banks and entities.³⁴ Tokyo has also provided non-lethal aid to Ukraine to help its resistance and cope with the unravelling humanitarian crisis.³⁵ At the same time, there is a growing echo for greater focus on Japan's defence efforts as the country prepares to revise the NSS by the end of 2022 (originally released in 2013). Abe has gone on record saying that Tokyo should discuss a variety of policy options, including nuclear sharing with Washington.³⁶ Abe's reasoning is simple: if Ukraine had entered the NATO, the alliance would have provided iron-clad guarantees, including the use of nuclear weapons to safeguard Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has, once again, emphasised the need to strengthen the deterrence obtained by the Japan-US security treaty through greater military preparedness.

The logic for greater military preparedness is simple. As Abe argued, "it is only natural to discuss how to protect the independence of our people and Japan in this reality that we live in."³⁷ Some think that to

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Mitsuru Obe, "Japan blocks 7 Russian banks from SWIFT, freezes oligarch assets", *Nikkei Asia*, 3 March 2022, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Ukraine-war/Japan-blocks-7-Russian-banks-from-SWIFT-freezes-oligarch-assets>.

³⁵ "Japan to give Ukraine bulletproof vests, relief goods", *Nikkei Asia*, 4 March 2022, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Ukraine-war/Japan-to-give-Ukraine-bulletproof-vests-relief-goods>.

³⁶ Ryuto Imao and Miki Nose, "Abe reiterates nuclear-sharing discussion is necessary", *Nikkei Asia*, 3 March 2022, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Abe-reiterates-nuclear-sharing-discussion-is-necessary>.

³⁷ Ibid.

safeguard its interests against Indo-Pacific's revisionist powers such as Russia and China, Japan should follow the example of Germany's defence efforts in the face of Russian aggression. Elbridge Colby, the former US Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategy and Force Development, recently wrote in *Nikkei Asian Review* that "only Japan, as the world's third-largest economy, has the scale to really make a difference alongside the United States in deterring Chinese aggression along the first island chain."³⁸ Even when the Quad summit amidst the crisis deliberately avoided explicit mention of Russia due to Indian sensitivities, Kishida urged the Indo-Pacific's maritime democracies to do more, "We agreed that under the current circumstances, it is important that we step up our efforts to realise a free and open Indo-Pacific."³⁹ Unlike the US, which many Indians think is overly sanctimonious over Russian aggression given its track record, Tokyo's words are taken seriously by the leadership in New Delhi. Tokyo's anxieties are valid as it is the only country within the Quad that has territorial disputes with both China and Russia.

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India

India has had a long-standing bilateral relationship with Russia. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi identified Russia as a key strategic partner for India in 1971 by signing the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation. Her desire to develop such a partnership was driven by a need to counter-balance American presence in South Asia and its support to Pakistan, India's regional rival. The Soviet Union, in turn, supplied India with critical defence equipment and would later go on to become India's most prominent defence supplier. Apart from the defence sector, the Soviet Union and later Russia have supported Indian efforts in research and development in key strategic sectors like space and nuclear programs. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the beginning of the unipolar moment created anxiety in the Indian policy establishment. Hence, India adopted a policy of strategic autonomy,

38 Elbridge Colby, "Japan should follow Germany's lead on Ukraine", *Nikkei Asia*, 1 March 2022, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/Japan-should-follow-Germany-s-lead-on-Ukraine>.

39 Rintaro Tobita and Rieko Miki, "Quad urges India to condemn Russia over Ukraine", *Nikkei Asia*, 4 March 2022, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Indo-Pacific/Quad-urges-India-to-condemn-Russia-over-Ukraine>.

looking to engage the West while simultaneously strengthening its relationship with middle powers. India has continued its partnership with Russia through coalitions like the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) and RIC.

Russia has also supported the development of India's nuclear triad by leasing ballistic missile submarines, INS Chakra I and II, to the Indian Navy.

This history of strategic engagement during the Cold War and post-Cold War eras created deep interlinkages between the two countries, especially in the defence sector. Between 2000 and 2020, Russia accounted for 66.5 per cent of India's arms imports. Of the US\$53.85 billion (S\$72.55 billion) spent by India on arms imports, US\$35.82 billion (S\$48.58 billion) went to Russia. During the same period, imports from the US to India were worth US\$4.4 billion (S\$5.97 billion).⁴⁰ According to research published by the Stimson Center, Russian platforms account for nearly 85 per cent of Indian military equipment.⁴¹ This has essentially created a 'lock-in' effect.⁴² This dependence is spread across all three service branches. Russia has supplied main battle tanks (T-72s and T-90s) and assault rifles to the Indian Army, fighter aircrafts (Migs and Sukhois), air defence systems (S-400) to the Indian Air Force, and an aircraft carrier (INS Vikramaditya) to the Indian Navy. Russia has also supported the development of India's nuclear triad by leasing ballistic missile submarines, INS Chakra I and II, to the Indian Navy. The Indian government is also negotiating the lease of two more nuclear submarines from Russia.

Additionally, the two countries have begun arms sales to third countries; the sale of Brahmos supersonic cruise missiles to the Philippines Navy for US\$375 million (S\$509 million) is one such example. They are looking towards expanding similar sales to Vietnam and Indonesia.⁴³ Such is India's dependence on Russian arms that, in the wake of the Galwan border clash and a general

40 Krishn Kaushik, "How Dependent is India on Russian Weapons", *The Indian Express*, 3 March 2022, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/india-russia-military-weapons-defence-ties-7795804/>.

41 Sameer Lalwani, Frank O'Donnell, Tyler Sagerstrom and Akriti Vasudeva, "The Influence of Arms: Explaining the Durability of India-Russia Alignment", *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, January 2021, <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Jan/15/2002565540/-1/-1/1/TOC.pdf>.

42 Ibid.

43 Yogesh Joshi, "Arms sales: A new vector of Sino-Indian competition in the Indo-Pacific", *ThinkChina*, 16 February 2022, <https://www.thinkchina.sg/arms-sales-new-vector-sino-indian-competition-indo-pacific>.

deterioration of the Sino-Indian relationship, India Defence Minister Rajnath Singh's first trip abroad after the border crisis was to Russia to ensure a steady supply of arms and spare parts for the Indian military.⁴⁴ This deep dependence has joined the two countries at the hip. As the Stimson Center's research notes, "the depth of [Russian] relative support to India's technology base and strategic systems have engendered a relatively high degree of indebtedness and trust in key strategic circles."⁴⁵ This trust continues to influence the Indian security establishment and creates challenges to shift policy dramatically.

Apart from political affinity and defence trade, India's engagement with Russia is also driven by a desire to mitigate the effects of a Sino-Russian alignment. In an ideal situation, India would like to see Russia support India or, at the very least, remain neutral. A Sino-Russian entente where Russia is a junior partner can have national security implications for India. As Russia becomes economically more dependent on China, it may encourage Beijing to act with impunity on the Sino-Indian border. China can leverage the one-sided economic relationship to pressure Russia and disrupt India's supply of defence equipment. Continuing engagement with Russia helps create space for India and Russia to manoeuvre.

Given these two issues, India would ideally like to see Russia develop diversified partnerships in the Indo-Pacific. To help diversify Russia's engagement in the Indo-Pacific, India has continued to maintain its special relationship with Russia while attempting to engage Moscow in various multilateral fora in the Indo-Pacific. In its recent bilateral engagement with Russia, India expanded ties in the political and economic arenas. India and Russia instituted a 2+2 dialogue between their foreign and defence ministers, with the first such interaction occurring in November 2021. The two countries are also negotiating a logistics sharing agreement similar to what India has signed with its Quad partners. Economically, the countries have looked to expand

A Sino-Russian entente where Russia is a junior partner can have national security implications for India.

44 Sandeep Unnithan, "Rajnath Singh goes arms shopping to Russia", *India Today*, 23 June 2020, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india-today-insight/story/rajnath-singh-goes-arms-shopping-to-russia-1691688-2020-06-23>.

45 Lalwani et al., "The Influence of Arms: Explaining the Durability of India-Russia Alignment", op. cit., p. 3.

Apart from the bilateral engagement, India is working to create synergies between its vision for the Indo-Pacific and Russian activities in the region.

trade ties beyond the defence sector. India is looking at Russia as a potential partner in the energy sector. India's government-owned natural gas corporation, GAIL Limited, has signed a 20-year agreement with Russian energy firm Gazprom to supply LNG.⁴⁶ During the India-Russia Summit in December 2021, Modi and Putin stressed the need to expand trade to reach the stipulated target of US\$30 billion (S\$40.7 billion) by 2025.⁴⁷ Apart from the bilateral engagement, India is working to create synergies between its vision for the Indo-Pacific and Russian activities in the region. The joint statement issued after the summit noted that the two sides "agreed to intensify consultations on complementarities between integration and development initiatives in greater Eurasian space and in the regions of Indian and Pacific oceans".⁴⁸ Modi has demonstrated India's interest in economic projects in Russia's Far East, thus extending India's 'Act East' policy to Vladivostok.⁴⁹ India has also backed Russian involvement in the Indian Ocean Rim Organisation, and Russia is now a dialogue partner in the organisation.⁵⁰

However, even when Delhi had laid out a red carpet for Putin in December 2021, the Russia-Ukraine crisis has forced India into a corner. As Putin faces severe economic sanctions and prospects of a failed campaign in Ukraine, Moscow may well end up being a vassal to China. Moscow's unambiguous alignment with Beijing will be a significant force multiplier for the latter. Eurasia's two most considerable continental military powers will be formidable for Indo-

46 Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, "India receives first direct shipment of Russian LNG under long term contract", *The Economic Times*, 26 October 2021, https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/energy/oil-gas/india-receives-first-direct-shipment-of-russian-lng-under-long-term-contract/articleshow/87287564.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst.

47 "India-Russia Joint Statement following the visit of the President of the Russian Federation", Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 6 December 2021, https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/34606/India_Russia_Joint_Statement_following_the_visit_of_the_President_of_the_Russian_Federation#:~:text=The%20Indian%20Side%20reiterated%20its,of%20the%20Russian%20Far%20East.

48 Ibid.

49 Dimitri Trenin, "Russia-India: From Rethink to Adjust to Upgrade", Carnegie Moscow, 2 December 2021, <https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/85903>.

50 Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, "Russia joins IORA as dialogue partner after India's backing", *The Economic Times*, 22 November 2021, https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/russia-joins-iora-as-dialogue-partner-after-indias-backing/articleshow/87854591.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst.

Pacific democracies to counter. Free-flowing energy supplies from Russia will resolve China's "Malacca Dilemma", and its relatively sophisticated military-technological complex can transform the Chinese military into a competent force. Most distressing would be Moscow's active support for Beijing vis-à-vis Delhi on the Sino-Indian border dispute. Moscow can delay or deny military equipment under pressure from Beijing or, worse, support Chinese actions on the border both materially and diplomatically. The growing Moscow-Islamabad bilateral relationship has also been a thorn for Delhi.

However, India's rather reserved reactions against Putin's invasion does not alleviate its predicament. First, India's silence contradicts its normative battle to uphold international law, respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, and unjustified use of force against China. It is currently embroiled in a significant confrontation along the Himalayan border with Beijing. The contradiction facing Indian decision-makers is simple but acute: if India will not stand for Russia's disregard of the values and norms of the international order, why would the world stand for India against its similar recriminations against China? Fighting over principles notwithstanding, India's material interests are also at stake. More significant dissonance with the West would complicate India's growing alignment with not only Indo-Pacific democracies but also European powers such as the UK, France and Germany, all of which are critical to maintaining a favourable balance of power in Asia and India's fight against China. Second, the Russian gambit and Western reaction will force Moscow to cling to Beijing more tightly, despite India's efforts to cushion Moscow's fall. Russian interests are independent of what India may want, and given its economic and diplomatic isolation, a situation could arise where Russia may find itself beholden to China. India needs to diversify its military dependence away from Russia and align further with the Quad countries.

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Europe

The European Union (EU) released its approach to the Indo-Pacific in April 2021, titled "EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific". In September 2021, the bloc released a Joint Communication, which

further detailed its strategy. The EU's strategy is fundamentally based on reinforcing the rules-based international order and principles such as democracy, human rights, the rule of law, freedom of navigation and international commitments. The idea behind the approach is to build synergies with Southeast Asia by focusing on non-traditional security challenges like climate change, maritime security and public health (especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic). In addition, the EU hopes to foster better trade links between Southeast Asia and Europe at a time when global power has shifted from the Atlantic to the Pacific Oceans. It has identified seven priority areas: sustainable and inclusive prosperity; green transition; ocean governance; digital governance and partnerships; connectivity; security and defence; and human security.⁵¹

As Europe engages, there is a possibility that it will come into conflict with Russian activities in the region.

While the EU has not prioritised traditional security threats, individual European countries have been deploying naval assets to the region. France probably has the most robust presence, exercising with the Quad navies and deploying a nuclear-powered submarine to the Indo-Pacific. Britain also deployed its largest naval vessel, HMS Queen Elizabeth's aircraft carrier, to the region.⁵² As Europe engages, there is a possibility that it will come into conflict with Russian activities in the region. Russia engages Southeast Asia extensively through defence, most notably as the region's top arms exporter. However, from a European perspective, Russia does not pose a significant challenge to European activities in the region. Except for the Northeast, Russia will likely remain focused on continental Asia rather than maritime Asia.

Europe sees Russian activities in the Indo-Pacific driven by anxiety rather than a grand strategy. Russian foreign policy will continue to focus on the West, especially the US, and developments in its

51 Joanne Lin, "The EU in the Indo-Pacific: A New Strategy with Implications for ASEAN", ISEAS Perspective 2021/164, 16 December 2021, <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2021-164-the-eu-in-the-indo-pacific-a-new-strategy-with-implications-for-asean-by-joanne-lin/#:~:text=The%20EU's%20Indo%2DPacific%20strategy%20can%20add%20a%20strong%20normative,partnerships%20and%20reinforcing%20multilateral%20cooperation.>

52 For more details on EU's engagement in the Indo-Pacific, see Yogesh Joshi, Ippeita Nishida and Nishant Rajeev (eds.), "Securing the Indo-Pacific: Expanding Cooperation between Asia and Europe", ISAS South Asia Discussion Papers, December 2021, <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/ISAS-Discussion-Paper-FINAL.pdf>.

neighbourhood rather than on the Indo-Pacific. As for its engagement in Asia, China will remain Russia's primary partner. Since his ascent to power, Putin has focused on re-establishing Russia's old sphere of influence. In this view, he invaded Georgia in 2008 and annexed Crimea from Ukraine in 2014. He has also sent Russian troops to intervene in the Syrian civil war on behalf of Assad, to bolster his regime. The deployment of Russian soldiers eventually turned the tide of the war in Assad's favour and secured his power.⁵³ In January 2022, Russian troops were also dispatched to quell the protests in Kazakhstan under the Collective Security Treaty Organization, a Russian-led Central Asian grouping. The intervention again sought to bolster the regime of Kazakhstan's President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev after domestic protests threatened to overthrow his government.

The competition with the US has been Russia's second priority in foreign policy. Russia, under Putin, has long been focused on a peer-to-peer military competition with the US. Presently, Moscow is focused on preventing the expansion of NATO around its borders and the associated deployment of American weapon systems and troops in neighbouring countries. In order to restore stability to the bilateral relationship, Biden and Putin met in Geneva in June 2021. While the summit itself did not produce any concrete outcomes, both parties agreed to remain engaged. At the time, Europe was secondary in Russia's foreign policy agenda. Thus, the Indo-Pacific region continues to remain peripheral to Russian interests. Its engagement in the region is motivated by a desire to diversify relations and move away from reliance on China as its sole partner in Asia.

Russia, under Putin, has long been focused on a peer-to-peer military competition with the US.

The third policy that Russia seeks to explore is to impose costs on Europe. Even before the invasion of Ukraine, Russian submarines were increasing activities in European waters,⁵⁴ and the Russian military had stepped up the deployment of anti-access area denial

53 Anna Borshchevskaya, "Russia's Strategic Success in Syria and the Future of Moscow's Middle East Policy", *Lawfare*, 23 January 2022, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/russias-strategic-success-syria-and-future-moscows-middle-east-policy>.

54 Scott Wyland, "Russian submarines are a growing threat, says Europe's top Navy commander", *Stars and Stripes*, 20 June 2018, <https://www.stripes.com/news/russian-submarines-are-a-growing-threat-says-europe-s-top-navy-commander-1.533828>.

capabilities closer to Europe. These deployments are accompanied by an increase in Russian territorial incursions into neighbouring countries' airspace. As a European Council on Foreign Relations policy brief notes, "In 2014, NATO and allied aircraft had to scramble over 400 times (*to confront Russian intrusions*), and the level of intrusions continued into 2016."⁵⁵ The Russian military has been using its military exercises to intimidate its neighbours who are drawing closer to the West. These exercises are used to practise simulated Russian invasion of its western neighbours, particularly the Nordic states. As part of these exercises, Russia has also simulated nuclear attacks on European countries like Poland.⁵⁶

Russia has gained influence in Africa through both conventional means like the supply of arms and unconventional means like providing mercenaries who support autocratic regimes, as in Syria and Iran.

Further, Russia has demonstrated an active and growing presence in Africa, aiming to undermine the Western political values and stabilisation efforts along Europe's southern boundary. Russia has gained influence in Africa through both conventional means like the supply of arms and unconventional means like providing mercenaries who support autocratic regimes, as in Syria and Iran.⁵⁷ As a result, Russia has gained access to resources on the continent as well as strategic bases and political support in multilateral fora.⁵⁸ Combined with the war in Ukraine, such Russian activities may stretch scarce European resources and deter Europe's continued military engagement in the Indo-Pacific region.

European views on Russian imprint on the Indo-Pacific may have proven true in the light of Putin's gambit in Ukraine. Europe, rather than the Indo-Pacific, remains in Putin's crosshairs. However, the significance of Ukraine's invasion is neither lost on the Indo-Pacific nor on Europe's future participation in the region. First, Putin has given a

55 Parenthesis and italics added by author. Mark Galeotti, "Heavy Metal Diplomacy: Russia's Political Use Of Its Military In Europe Since 2014", ECFR Policy Brief, December 2016, https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/Heavy_Metal_Diplomacy_Final_2.pdf.

56 Ibid.

57 Russia Monitor, "Russian Mercenaries in Syria," 22 April 2017, Warsaw Institute, <https://warsawinstitute.org/russian-mercenaries-in-syria/>.

58 Joseph Siegle, "Russia's asymmetric strategy for expanding influence in Africa", LSE Blogs, 17 September, 2021, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2021/09/17/russia-asymmetric-strategy-expanding-influence-in-africa-security-moscow/>.

new meaning to NATO.⁵⁹ What then US President Donald Trump could not accomplish with constant pressure on NATO, Putin has done with Ukraine's invasion. The military transformation of Europe, especially with Germany's revolutionary reversal of its defence policy, will have severe consequences for the Indo-Pacific too.⁶⁰ A reinforced NATO, insofar it allows the US to focus on the East, will help to balance China's growing power in the region. Furthermore, given the Sino-Russian nexus, it is certain that European concerns and ire will be raised. European focus on China will only increase as Moscow tightens its embrace of Beijing in response to Western economic sanctions. Considering the fact that Russia is a declining power, Europe's military resurgence will allow greater scrutiny of China in the long run. The debilitating Western sanctions imposed on Russia will be observed keenly in China. Though it would be difficult to impose similar sanctions on Beijing, the power of liberal economies is on full display in the ongoing Ukrainian crisis.⁶¹ Lastly, the normative defence of Ukraine has raised similar concerns for Taiwan.⁶² Putin's Ukrainian adventure has put Xi into a significant dilemma and has created difficulties for Beijing's timelines to absorb Taiwan. As a reaction to Ukraine, one might also witness greater European engagement on the Taiwanese issue. The maritime democracies of the Indo-Pacific will gladly welcome European revival against revisionism by authoritarian powers.

A reinforced NATO, insofar it allows the US to focus on the East, will help to balance China's growing power in the region.

59 "The Ukraine Crisis and Asia: Implications and Responses", Event Transcript, CSIS, 2 March 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/ukraine-crisis-and-asia-implications-and-responses>.

60 Maria Sheahan and Sarah Marsh, "Germany to increase defence spending in response to 'Putin's war' – Scholz", *Reuters*, 27 February 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/germany-hike-defense-spending-scholz-says-further-policy-shift-2022-02-27/>.

61 Scott Kennedy, "China's Economy and Ukraine: All Downside Risks", CSIS Commentary, 3 March 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/chinas-economy-and-ukraine-all-downside-risks>.

62 Ryan Hass, "Learning the right lessons from Ukraine for Taiwan", Brookings, 22 February 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/02/22/learning-the-right-lessons-from-ukraine-for-taiwan/>.

Conclusion: Implications for the Regional Actors

As seen from the preceding sections, both India and Japan have been engaged with Russia, albeit to varying degrees and for different reasons. Both countries are concerned about a Sino-Russian entente and its implications for their security situation and balance of power. Japan's concerns are driven by geography while India's by economic ties in the defence sector. These positions may create friction within the Quad as the US and Australia have taken a more rigid anti-Russia stance. Russia's recent invasion of Ukraine has only aggravated these tensions.

Given Russia's deteriorating relationship with the West, China and Russia have deepened their partnership.

The hopes of creating wedges in the Sino-Russian relationship held by India and Japan have not yielded material results. Given Russia's deteriorating relationship with the West, China and Russia have deepened their partnership. A lack of economic opportunities elsewhere has heightened Russia's dependence on China. Following the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the Russian economy had been hit hard by sanctions, leading to the collapse of the ruble. The sanctions have cost the Russian economy nearly US\$40 billion (\$54 billion).⁶³ Thus, Russia and China developed an economic partnership, although it remains lopsided in China's favour. A report by the Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS) notes:

“In 2010, China surpassed Germany to become Russia's largest single trading partner...China has become more important for Russia in recent years, accounting for 15.5 per cent of its total trade in 2018. Russia, in contrast, only accounted for 0.8 per cent of China's total trade in 2018. Russia's largest export, energy, is strategically important. Still, as the trade relationship becomes even more lopsided, China stands to command more influence as a buyer than Russia does as a supplier.”⁶⁴

⁶³ Geoffrey Smith, “Finance Minister: oil slump, sanctions cost Russia \$140 billion a year”, *Fortune*, 24 November 2014, <https://fortune.com/2014/11/24/finance-minister-oil-slump-sanctions-cost-russia-140-billion-a-year/>.

⁶⁴ Jonathan E Hillman, “China and Russia: Economic Unequals”, CSIS Report, 15 July 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/china-and-russia-economic-unequals>.

In terms of investment as well, China is critical to Russia. Russia's Yamal LNG project was only made possible with Chinese support. The CSIS report added that "China provided financing through its Silk Road Fund, loans from its state policy banks, and investment through a state-owned enterprise. China also used the Silk Road Fund and another state-owned enterprise to invest in Sibur, Russia's largest petrochemical company."⁶⁵ Russian dependence on China will likely increase, given the crippling sanctions that the West has imposed on Russia after it invaded Ukraine.⁶⁶

Both Japan and India will be unable to pull Russia out of China's orbit, primarily due to its one-sided nature. The strong premiership of Abe largely drove Japan's engagement with Russia over the last decade. In Japan, political appetite does not exist to undertake a rapprochement with Russia, particularly after the invasion of Ukraine. Furthermore, Japanese companies will be unwilling to undertake risky projects with no guaranteed results and under the threat of sanctions from the US. The Russian economy still suffers from red tape, poor infrastructure, corruption and problems with low rejuvenation prospects. Thus, Tokyo will likely align more closely with Washington and like-minded partners as it forgoes attempts to engage Russia. Japan has already supported the US' sanctions against Russia in the wake of its invasion of Ukraine.

In Japan, political appetite does not exist to undertake a rapprochement with Russia, particularly after the invasion of Ukraine.

Economically, India has fewer prospects of providing any sustainable alternative to Russia. While India and Russia have focused on expanding economic links, India lacks the resources to support the Russian economy to the degree China can. India is also the customer in strategic sectors rather than an equal partner, giving it less negotiating room. Thus, India will have to tread cautiously and manage its relationship with Russia and the US. It already faces a looming threat of sanctions due to its procurement of Russia's S-400 air defence system. For now, India has chosen to remain neutral and has

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ "Western sanctions on Russia are like none the world has seen", *The Economist*, 5 March 2022, <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2022/03/05/western-sanctions-on-russia-are-like-none-the-world-has-seen>.

At the moment, the US has offered India some wriggle room as it remains an essential partner for the US in its competition against China.

abstained in voting on UN resolutions to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine.⁶⁷ The stance is likely driven by India's heavy dependence on Russian military hardware and a simultaneous military crisis with China on its northern borders. At the moment, the US has offered India some wriggle room as it remains an essential partner for the US in its competition against China. The US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, Donald Lu, defended the India-US relationship at a Senate Foreign Affairs Committee hearing despite its abstention at the UNSC. He called the India-US relationship one of the "defining partnerships" with implications for the security of Asia, of the US, and of the world.⁶⁸

Europe will likewise have to make tough decisions moving forward. The EU has been one of Russia's largest trading partners. However, as the economic relationship with Russia collapses due to sanctions, some European states may turn to China to fill the void. Simultaneously, the European states will need to decide where to direct their resources – towards the immediate continental military threat from a potent but declining power like Russia or the long-term politico-military-economic threat from a highly strategic rising power like China. Either outcome will affect its engagement with Asia and the Indo-Pacific.

67 "India Abstains On UN Resolution "Deploring Russia's Aggression" In Ukraine", *NDTV*, 2 March 2022, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/india-abstains-from-un-resolution-that-deplores-russias-aggression-2799989>.

68 "US continues to engage with India to underscore importance of condemning Russian invasion: Top diplomat", *The Indian Express*, 3 March 2022, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/russia-ukraine-war-india-condemn-putin-us-diplomat-7799031/>; and Nirupama Subramanian, "India cancelled orders of Russian jets, weapons: US official at Senate hearing", *The Indian Express*, 4 March 2022, <https://indianexpress.com/article/world/russia-ukraine-war-india-weapons-systems-us-7799245/>.

Appendix 1

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