

# INTRODUCTION: The geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific

Edition 9, 2022

[Professor Timothy J. Lynch and Professor Robert S. Ross](#)

DOI: [10.37839/MAR2652-550X9.4](https://doi.org/10.37839/MAR2652-550X9.4)

The war in Ukraine has thrown into relief the prospects for peace in the Indo-Pacific. In articles by regional and country specialists, this edition analyses the sources of regional stability and what might undermine it in the months and years ahead. Authors have paid special attention to US-China competition and the implications for the foreign policies of the regional powers and for regional order.

There are two contending perspectives in this edition and in the wider scholarly debate, on the prospects for Indo-Pacific stability. The first sees the prospects for stability and peace as fundamentally good. Ukraine, if anything, has revealed the price of aggression. Europe and NATO have achieved levels of unity and cooperation in the face of Russian militarism that have raised expectations for the high costs of aggression in the Indo-Pacific.

A second interpretation sees the perils of instability in emerging regional competition. The fate of Ukraine reminds this school of the enduring presence of war in international politics. Rather than a zone of free trade and democratic peace, the Indo-Pacific is an arena of heightened competition, characterised by a rising China's aspirations and the corresponding U.S. containment of China. If Putin restarted history with his invasion of Ukraine, these authors are sceptical that history ever ended in the Indo-Pacific. Realism, not internationalism, is a better guide for what comes next.

There are several features of the emerging regional order, explored in and argued about, across this edition of Melbourne Asia Review.

## Chinese power is considerable but possibly exaggerated and containable

Perhaps China is not quite as awesome as both its admirers and detractors believe? [Timothy Lynch](#) considers the implications of the limits of Chinese power for regional order. The challenges facing the Chinese government are considerable—from demographic imbalance to slower economic growth. Its inability to resolve these challenges has the potential to generate riskier external behaviour. Perhaps, asks Lynch, China is an emerging threat for its weaknesses, rather than for its strengths?

[Sungmin Cho](#) joins this debate by considering Chinese perceptions, reflected in public rhetoric, of the rise of China and its role in the regional order. He finds neither doubt nor weakness but resolve and confidence. ‘The optimism about China’s rise,’ he notes, ‘and the conviction of American decline is in stark contrast with some American scholars’ recent assessment that China’s power will soon be in decline and that Chinese elites are anxious about it.’ This ‘perceptual gap,’ spells conflict, writes Cho.

The closing gap in U.S.-China capabilities, reasons [Robert Ross](#), can lead to spiralling conflict. Heightened tensions and crises can only be avoided by ‘mutual restraint.’ The challenges of forging such restraint between a revisionist China and a status-quo U.S. are enormous but not insurmountable. Taiwan is the critical issue. The United States must convince China that it would support the island militarily—to deter Chinese aggression—but not deepen its security alliance with Taipei to the point that it provokes the mainland use of force it seeks to deter. If the United States cannot maintain this balance, crisis escalation is a real possibility.

Regional perceptions of U.S. power are unavoidably tied to the chaotic 2021 U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. [Shi Yinhong](#) cautions that following its humiliating withdrawal from Vietnam in 1975, in 1981 the United States experienced a ‘strong assertion’ of nationalism, culminating in the demise of the USSR. While the war on

terror led to a series of U.S. defeats and retreats, the U.S. has shown a capacity to recalibrate and to bounce back. President Biden will thus continue to focus on the Indo-Pacific.

## The Quad makes competition more not less likely

Prospects for the Quadrilateral Security Initiative, or the 'Quad' (between Australia, India, Japan, and the U.S.) look bright, given the rise of China and the recent growth of autocratic governance in Beijing and Moscow. But unity in the face of China's rise is not assured. The Quad may posture as a democratic alliance, but its efficacy will owe more to common security interests. Russia's brutal war on Ukraine has exposed New Delhi's bind. It cannot condemn Russia without jeopardising its access to Russian arms; Russia provides India with almost 90 percent of its weapons. [Nick Bisley](#) analyses such constraints on cooperation among the Quad countries. The unintended consequences of further security cooperation, he argues, may well contribute to heightened great power competition and conflict, rather than regional stability.

[Pradeep Taneja](#) assesses India's multiple dilemmas in this complex policy setting. The growing economic and military asymmetry between India and China challenges Modi's efforts to maintain balance and non-alignment, central to India's foreign policy since independence. India needs Russia for its defence, and it needs China for economic growth. How far could New Delhi appease both China and the United States, even before the Ukraine war, without offending one side or the other? [Harsh Pant](#) offers an optimistic answer. Rather than merely coping with its geostrategic contradictions, he considers how 'Indian resilience' has met 'Chinese belligerence'. The Quad is evidence, he argues, that New Delhi has adapted well to the constraints it faces; the Quad has challenged Beijing's 'assertiveness'. 'India's role has been central in galvanising' the Quad, and 'giving in to a bullying power is not the only option available' to India and its allies.

## Australian leadership is needed but lacking

The chill in the Australia-China relationships is a necessary but insufficient cause of the growing Quad cooperation and of AUKUS initiative (Australia, UK, U.S), which may not count as an alliance, argues [Thomas Wilkins](#). Australian resistance to the rise of China would likely have proceeded without Beijing's hostile rhetoric and unreasonable demands, but China's Australian policy made it a priority. Canberra has sought to bolster its regional alliances, with the U.S. most obviously, but also Japan, just as Beijing has attempted to use trade to weaken these alliances. The result has been a diplomatic stand-off with neither side able to find a middle to meet in.

A better model for Australia's China policy, argues [David Walton](#), is Japan's. Although Japan and China contend over much deeper animosities and territorial disputes than Australia and China, Tokyo 'has been enjoying a thawing in political relations and a gradual improvement in diplomatic ties with China since 2014.' Why? The Japanese government has privileged pragmatism and communication over scoring diplomatic points in an apparent neo-cold war bloc conflict. Despite enhanced U.S.-Japan security cooperation, Sino-Japanese diplomacy (and trade) is healthy. Successive Japanese prime ministers have maintained a firm but balanced approach toward China that has enhanced Japanese wealth and security. Australia, in contrast, has engaged in a form of 'economic decoupling,' argues [Diane Hu](#). This has undermined Australian economic interests and influence vis-a-vis China. 'The declining volume of capital flow between the two countries speaks to declining levels of trust and good will.'

[Elena Collinson](#) assesses the wider consequences of this trend in Australian policy, especially of the allegations by Australia's Prime Minister Scott Morrison against China over the origins of COVID-19. Australia, she argues, has embraced ideological hostility toward China that it had previously eschewed. [Melissa Conley Tyler and Sarah Allan](#) go further. Australia has generated a self-fulfilling prophecy: by

depicting the region as a zone of conflict and competition, successive Canberra governments have helped make it so. One solution, writes [John Blaxland](#), is ‘visionary leadership’ and ‘clear-eyed management.’ Although he does not support the ‘blame-Australia first’ criticism of the Morrison government, he does contend that all states, including Australia, need to be more cognizant of how their behaviour contributes to conflict. Rehabilitation of honour in statecraft is overdue.

## Competition endures

Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan (the states of post-Soviet Central Asia) are increasingly a focus of competition between the United States, China, and Russia. Our conception of the regional order has extended from the Asia-Pacific to the greater Indo-Pacific—an enormous region of the world where conflict is latent but not unthinkable. Central Asia is increasingly part of a bloc-vs-bloc division along ideological lines. China supports political stability throughout the region, including the stability of the region’s authoritarian governments, while the United States promotes liberal democracy. This has encouraged Central Asian governments to develop ‘multivectorism,’ to maximise their interests in this great power competition. As [Alexander Cooley](#) argues, Central Asian governments have considerable agency in this new ‘great game.’ He concludes that we are entering a ‘Multivector Era.’ In the aftermath of the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan, Central Asia politics requires greater policy sophistication on the part of Washington.

The Korean peninsula, similarly, is a focus of U.S.-China competition, a competition between a land power and a sea power. As [Moon Chung-in and Sung-won Lee](#) stress, greater attention to international law cannot diminish the enduring centrality of geopolitics. Han Morgenthau observed that ‘the destiny of the Korean Peninsula of over 2,000 years was determined by the balance of power between the strong powers competing for the governance of hegemonic countries that control the Korean Peninsula or the control thereof.’ Without greater cooperation (‘transcending

diplomacy’) between the middle powers of the wider region, argue Moon and Sung-won, the peninsula will remain the subject of great power competition.

Hopes that the emergence of multilateralism will moderate militarised great power competition are assessed by [Sarah Teo](#). ASEAN, she says, remains central to region-wide multilateralism. An optimistic case for the influence of Indonesia, ASEAN’s ‘informal leader’, on regional stability is offered by [Muhamad Arif](#). But the challenges to ASEAN unity are considerable, and its success uncertain. As [Denny Roy](#) argues, North Korea’s belligerent diplomacy and its challenges to peninsular stability undermine the regional architecture that internationalists promote.

\*\*

The impact of the war in Ukraine on great power competition in the Indo-Pacific is uncertain. Liberal internationalists will take succour from a sanctions regime that seeks to curtail Russian aggression, as well as the costs of war for all countries. China will surely take note of the costs of aggression to the Russian economy and may well moderate its Taiwan policy. For its part, the United States may be cautioned by the widespread costs of great power conflict in Europe and may moderate its containment policies in the Indo-Pacific. While unknowns will persist, the task of regional analysts is to map where we might go with reference to where we have come from.

*Authors: Professor [Timothy J. Lynch](#) and Professor [Robert S. Ross](#)*

*Image credit: [USDA/Flickr](#).*