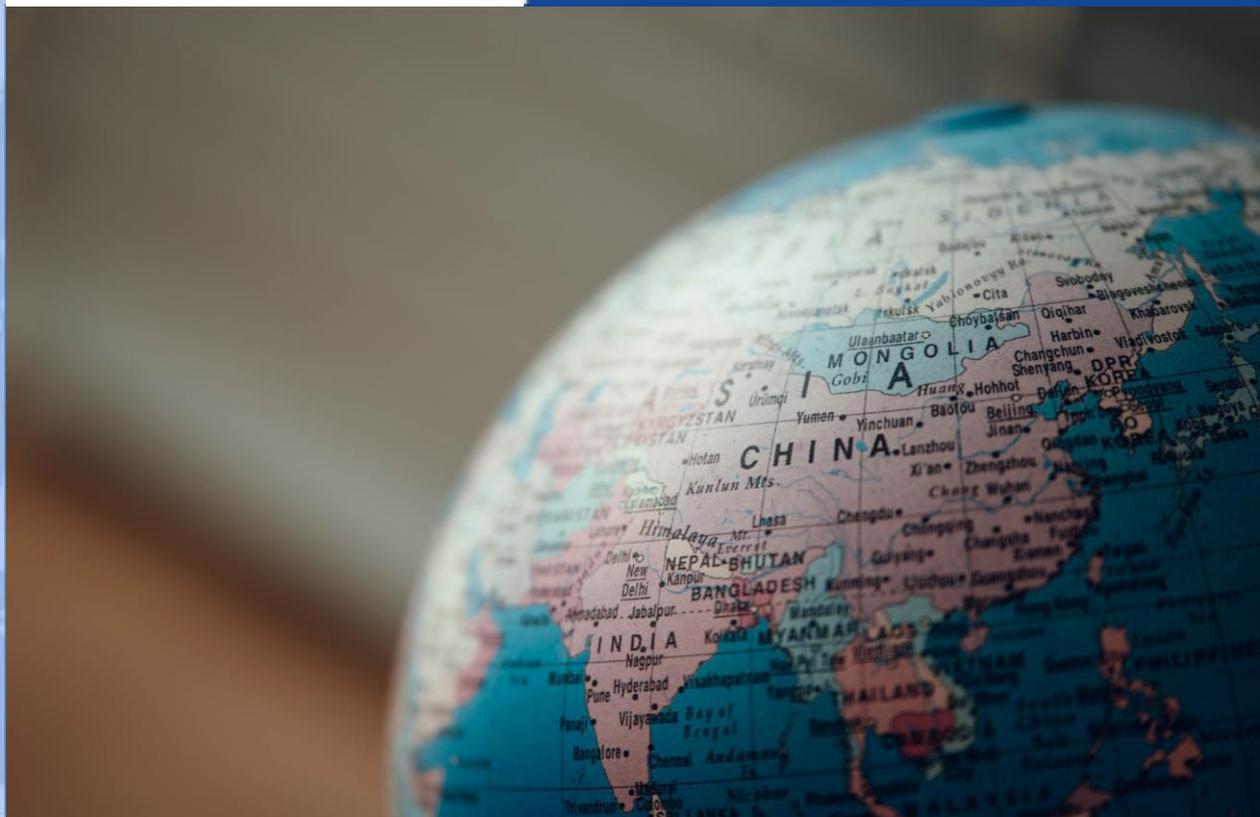


Europe's Indo-Pacific Strategy: Moving Beyond US-China Rivalry and Refocusing on Asia



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Introduction

In August 2021 the LeidenAsiaCentre published a [report](#) assessing how the “Indo-Pacific” strategies of the European Union (EU) and its member states compared with the approaches of other countries in Asia as well as that of the United States (US). Shortly after, on 16 September 2021, the EU published its [“Strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific”](#), which set out the bloc’s priorities for engagement with the Indo-Pacific. On the eve of the announcement of the EU’s joint strategy in this document, the US and the UK agreed to sell nuclear submarine technology to Australia as part of a new cooperative security format dubbed AUKUS. This agreement undermined French-Australian submarine agreements. The result was to immediately call into question who exactly the EU might cooperate with in the Indo-Pacific, and on which issues.

At the start of 2022 there were therefore a range of outstanding questions about where the EU’s new Indo-Pacific strategy was heading. These included uncertainties with regard to rising US-China strategic rivalry. France took over the six-month rotating presidency of the EU Council at the start of the year. It had declared that forging ahead with the bloc’s new Indo-Pacific strategy would be one of its priorities. This new LeidenAsiaCentre report was originally formulated to ask where France was likely to take the EU’s nascent Indo-Pacific strategy. Such a focus seemed especially pertinent for several reasons. First, France had been one of the most important voices in member state and EU-level efforts to prioritize the Indo-Pacific. Second, France was a key player in the disruptive row over AUKUS. Indeed, France did prioritize the Indo-Pacific as part of its EU Council presidency during the first half of 2022. These efforts included holding an “EU Ministerial Forum for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific” on 22 February. However, two events subsequently overshadowed the discussion about the approach of France and the EU to the Indo-Pacific: the French presidential elections in April 2022 and, more importantly, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

This new LeidenAsianCentre report therefore takes a broader view, examining the implications of the dramatic events surrounding the Ukraine crisis for Europe’s approach to the Indo-Pacific. It begins by providing a brief overview of the status of the EU strategy prior to the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis. This overview also discusses the French efforts to move

the strategy forward, such as the February Indo-Pacific Ministerial Forum. The report then picks up on a number of key themes from the original LeidenAsiaCentre report published in August 2021. In particular, it further highlights the fact that the EU's approach to the Indo-Pacific is developing in the shadow of growing US-China rivalry.

The report's key finding is that while the Ukraine crisis has bolstered transatlantic solidarity and elicited support from some countries in Asia, it has not fundamentally changed European, American or Asian calculations about the Indo-Pacific. It has not altered the interests, or challenges, in promoting the Indo-Pacific for the EU, the US, or any countries in the region itself. Instead, the crisis has underscored the importance and complexity of Europe's ties to both China and the US. It has also highlighted the challenge of understanding what countries in the Indo-Pacific do and do not want or need. Indeed, viewing the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy through the lens of the Ukraine crisis risks taking for granted what supposedly "like-minded" actors in the region actually think and what their interests are. Many countries in the region have been unwilling to openly criticize Russia, or China's support for it, while a minority such as Japan has pushed for an ever-more consolidated effort on the part of democracies to deter further autocratic aggression in Europe or Asia. How key players such as ASEAN, India, and Japan view European efforts to address the region's diplomatic, economic, and governance challenges will therefore be key in determining the effectiveness of the EU's engagement with the region. If this all were not difficult enough, the EU's ability to effectively respond to the challenges and opportunities of the Indo-Pacific region will be all the more complex given its growing dependence on the US and deteriorating relations with China.

1. Key Developments in European Indo-Pacific Policy: France and Russia-Ukraine

1.1 France

Two developments that have occurred since the EU published its Indo-Pacific strategy in September 2021 stand out for their importance to European Indo-Pacific Policy: 1) The first is the tensions over the announcement of US-UK-Australian (AUKUS) maritime security cooperation and what that meant for French leadership of the EU Indo-Pacific strategy going into 2022; 2) The second is the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Both events underscored the way in which European approaches to the Indo-Pacific cannot be understood outside the context of other countries and regional groupings' approaches to the region. They also showed that the EU's approach to the region cannot be understood outside of the more specific context of a growing US-China rivalry that affects countries in Asia, Europe, and beyond.

On 15 September 2021, the US and UK announced they would cooperate to provide nuclear submarine technology to Australia under the AUKUS cooperation framework. This displaced a French agreement to sell submarines to Australia. The announcement therefore cast an immediate pall over the EU's publication of its Indo-Pacific strategy the next day. The title of the EU strategy, emphasizing "cooperation" in the Indo-Pacific, clashed with the effort of the three AUKUS countries, all of whom had announced their own Indo-Pacific strategies.¹ Indeed, the French foreign minister [described](#) the agreement as "a stab in the back". Even though the French and EU Indo-Pacific strategy documents had emphasized that European approaches to the region should be open, inclusive, and aimed at mitigating US-China tensions in the region, there had been expectations that the EU's approach might usher in greater cooperation with the new Biden administration as well as with countries like

¹ As the first LeidenAsiaCentre report on the Indo-Pacific noted, the UK's approach to the Indo-Pacific was included in its "Integrated Review" from March 2021.

Australia.² However, the AUKUS announcement highlighted key differences in European and US approaches to the Indo-Pacific and the very real challenges of any potential transatlantic coordination or cooperation in the region. These have been similarly apparent in the negotiations between the EU and China regarding a Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI).

At the beginning of 2022, France took over the six-month rotating presidency of the European Council. At this point, there were more questions than answers as to where France, arguably Europe's strongest proponent of a focus on the Indo-Pacific, would take the EU's new strategy. After all, the EU's strategy document contained no less than seven "priority areas" which included sustainable and inclusive prosperity, green transition, ocean governance, digital governance and partnerships, digital connectivity, security and defense, and human security. All of these different areas are vast and complex in their own right. Ultimately, then, it was possibly unrealistic to have expectations of clear outcomes in terms of a defined focus or even potential change of direction. This was especially given that the French presidential election was due to be held in April 2022.

However, France did organize a "Ministerial Forum for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific", planning the event and then co-hosting it along with the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, on 22 February 2022.³ Over 30 representatives from designated Indo-Pacific countries, along with those of all EU member states, attended the Forum to discuss [three general sets of issues](#): 1) connectivity and digital technology (including linking the Indo-Pacific strategy with the EU's new "Global Gateway" infrastructure initiative), 2) global challenges such as climate, biodiversity, oceans and health, and 3) security and defense. At the very least, this selection of topics demonstrated that states in the Indo-

² Such sentiments were, for example, clearly expressed during US Congressional testimony in which the author participated in July 2021 and were present in some think tank and track 1.5 discussions in Europe.

³ In addition to the official French and EU-hosted Forum, various academic and think tank conferences focused on the Indo-Pacific have been held in France. For example, in January 2022 SciencesPo [held a conference](#) entitled "The EU and the Indo-Pacific: What Strategy, with Which Partners?", the title of which underscores the fundamental questions surrounding French and EU approaches to developing the strategy.

Pacific are interested in and receptive to specific aspects of the EU's new strategy. It is also notable that the US, China, and Russia were not formally invited to participate in the Forum.

1.2 Russia-Ukraine

In February 2022, as the Forum was taking place, tensions over Russian plans to invade Ukraine were rising. This was then followed, two days later on 24 February, by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The Ukraine crisis is geographically far removed from the Indo-Pacific, however broadly conceived. However, despite this, the crisis has subsequently come to dominate many of the discussions about the EU's approach to the Indo-Pacific. In particular, it has brought the EU's relationship with the US and China, both of which were not invited to the French Forum, squarely back into the picture. Indeed, for some, Europe's approach towards the Indo-Pacific, including its relationship with the US and China in the Indo-Pacific region, is increasingly viewed through the lens of the Ukraine crisis. The rest of this report gives an overview of how the crisis has impacted Europe's ties with first China and then the US. This is followed by analysis of where this leaves Europe's broader strategy and relationship with the Indo-Pacific region.

The EU's Indo-Pacific strategy document was careful not to frame its approach to the region as targeting China. However, it is clear that Europe-China relations loom large in the EU's overall approach to the Indo-Pacific. The Russian invasion of Ukraine, and China's stance of tacit support for Russia during the crisis, has underscored how difficult it will be for the EU to keep its ties with China separate from its more specific approach to the Indo-Pacific, including who it partners with in the region and on which issues. In particular, the Ukraine crisis has led to increased tensions in an already difficult and deteriorating EU-China relationship.

Maybe the clearest example of increasing strains in the Europe-China relationship came during the EU-China Summit on 1 April 2022. In the build-up to the Summit, with the Ukraine crisis dominating both foreign policy and domestic economic discussions throughout Europe, European calls for China to come out in clear opposition to Russia's invasion had been frequent and vocal. However, equally insistent was China's refusal to criticize Russia or to limit its own claims that the US and NATO had prompted the crisis by threatening Russian

security. At the April Summit, these positions persisted. The EU focused on the Ukraine crisis, as well as on longer standing concerns about Chinese sanctions on EU lawmakers and China's punishment of Lithuania for opening a Taiwan representative office. For some observers, the EU's willingness to take a tough stance with China during the Summit was further evidence of the EU becoming a "geopolitical actor". The EU's tougher stance on China, combined with renewed solidarity in response to the Ukraine crisis, have therefore been seen by some as significant turning points in the EU's foreign and security policy. The Ukraine crisis has prompted calls for the EU to stand up against the world's two main "autocracies", Russia and China, in solidarity with other like-minded countries such as the US and others in Asia.

The Ukraine crisis has therefore not only underlined and exacerbated tensions between Europe and China, but also reinvigorated discussions about transatlantic solidarity and cooperation, including in the Indo-Pacific. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has transformed transatlantic cooperation. While the dispute about AUKUS had hampered aspects of potential cooperation between the EU and two key Indo-Pacific partners, the US and Australia, now there is renewed drive for coordination. Although more general [plans and hopes](#) for potential US-EU cooperation when US President Biden began his first term had amounted to little, a year after Biden had come to office, the invasion revitalized these efforts. Within the EU, the crisis in Ukraine spurred new levels of cohesion and commitment on security and military issues. This in turn has laid the foundations for a period of intense European and US security cooperation, including through NATO. At the same time, US and European coordination on economic sanctions against Russia, and discussions about alleviating European dependence on Russian energy supplies, have transformed planning for practical transatlantic economic cooperation. This US and European cooperation on economic issues, including sanctions against Russia, has also led to closer coordination between them in their messaging to China about the risks of coming to Russia's aid.

The crisis has given new life to a more ideological element of "Western" solidarity. Namely, politicians argue that as like-minded democracies, the US and EU should stand together

against autocracy, especially its two primary exemplars and proponents: Russia and China.⁴ The US and Europe share concerns about China's diplomatic and material support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine. They are also both concerned about how Russia's actions in Ukraine could spur on China's irredentist claims over Taiwan.

Moreover, the Ukraine crisis has exposed Europe's deep reliance on Russian natural gas and oil. This has exacerbated criticism of European economic dependence on China and of the exposure of European governments and firms to Chinese economic coercion. It has led to increased calls for a fundamental reassessment of European and US relations with China. The EU had previously appeared to be attempting a tripartite balance of relations with China. China is described in the 2019 Strategic Outlook as a "[cooperation partner...economic competitor...and system rival](#)". *However*, the Ukraine crisis has for some underscored that Europe needs to focus on the competitor and rival components while setting aside naïve hopes about partnership, much like the US.

Yet neither China nor the US were the (avowed) focal point of the EU's Indo-Pacific strategy. If this is the case, then what is the relevance of these developments surrounding the Ukraine crisis for Europe's approach to the Indo-Pacific? The answer is that in galvanizing a broader sense of transatlantic solidarity, the Ukraine crisis has prompted at least some US and EU officials to express optimism that this solidarity will extend into broader cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.

Another important reason for revived discussions of transatlantic cooperation in the Indo-Pacific was the US Biden administration's publication of its [own Indo-Pacific strategy. This was published](#) in February 2022, on the eve of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.⁵ An [online discussion](#) on 28 February, sponsored by The German Marshall Fund of the United States and

⁴ Note that this stance is generally not shared by many countries in Africa, Latin America, and much of Asia. Moreover, the Biden administration has pushed this more ideological dimension of transatlantic cooperation than most European counterparts

⁵ Note that in the LeidenAsiaCentre's August 2021 publication on the Indo-Pacific, the Biden administration was in the midst of formulating its own Indo-Pacific strategy document. This was intended to replace a number of policy statements issued by the Trump administration, including the [State Department's 2019 document](#) on a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific".

titled “US-Europe Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific”, provided an authoritative and illuminating overview of how US and EU officials thought about their respective strategies in the wake of the publication of the American strategy and the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis. Participating in the discussion on the American side were US National Security Council officials in charge of the American Indo-Pacific policy and strategy, Kurt Campbell and Mira Rapp-Hooper. Participating on the European side were the EU External Action Service’s Managing Director for Asia and the Pacific, Gunnar Wiegand, and the EU Special Envoy for the Indo-Pacific, Gabriele Visentin. Both sides emphasized how the Ukraine crisis had prompted a “moment of extraordinary solidarity” in US-EU relations, during which “historic transformations will take place” (Rapp-Hooper). Regarding the US and EU Indo-Pacific strategies in particular, Visentin said that he saw an “almost total convergence” and that the “overall structure, philosophy, and main aims [of the two strategies] are coinciding”.

However, despite such talk of a new era of transatlantic cooperation, including in the Indo-Pacific, it is far from clear that the EU’s approach toward the Indo-Pacific will be altered as a result of the Ukraine crisis, including the potential strengths and flaws in this approach. The following section of this report provides an appraisal of what has and what has not changed regarding the main focus areas of the EU’s approach to the Indo-Pacific. It assesses to what extent the Ukraine crisis fundamentally alters the EU’s dilemma of trying to seek a middle way between the US and China in the Indo-Pacific. It then discusses how the EU, the US, and any other country attempting to formulate and implement an “Indo-Pacific Strategy”, first and foremost need to understand complex dynamics, interests, concerns, and problems in the region itself.

2. What is New and What is Not for Europe and the Indo-Pacific

In late February, at their high-level public discussion about their respective Indo-Pacific strategies, EU and American officials gave the distinct impression of almost complete solidarity. The optimistic and enthusiastic expressions of alignment by officials on both sides seemed driven by the immediacy of the Ukraine crisis and perhaps more fundamentally by the similarities in their respective Indo-Pacific strategies. However, as has been discussed above, before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and before the Biden administration's publication of its Indo-Pacific strategy, it was by no means obvious that the EU and US saw eye-to-eye about an expanding "Western" or transatlantic partnership in the Indo-Pacific. This included their lack of consensus on China issues. It was remarkable, therefore, to see such unvarnished expressions of EU and US shared vision and purpose regarding the Indo-Pacific. It was especially surprising given the AUKUS controversy, the French leadership of the EU's Indo-Pacific policy at the start of 2022, and the broader differences in the European and US approaches to the region as well as the bitter taste left by the Trump administration's approach to transatlantic relations.

To what extent does the Ukraine crisis alter the EU's calculations and priorities in the Indo-Pacific? In particular, how has it affected the EU's willingness to declare and act on a newfound sense of solidarity with the US in the region? In fact, despite growing talk of alignment and of a smooth pathway for EU-US cooperation regarding approaches to the Indo-Pacific in recent months, most of the fundamental interests and concerns of both parties remain unchanged.

The explicit or implied arguments that have been made about how or why the Ukraine crisis is a watershed moment in the transatlantic relationship and how it plays out in the Indo-Pacific are based on three types of claims. First, they claim that China's refusal to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and its refusal to support economic sanctions, has emboldened and empowered Russia to pursue the war and potentially evade Western sanctions. Second, they claim that China, in turn, might be newly emboldened and empowered to attack Taiwan. Third, they claim that Russia and China are autocracies which, acting both on their own and together, are undermining democratic values and multilateral institutions. While it is beyond the scope of this report to more fully evaluate the logic and implications of these arguments,

if we want to understand what is potentially “new” about the EU’s approach to the Indo-Pacific, including possible closer cooperation with the US in this region, then they should be considered. It is clear that the second and third claims were present well before Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Even the immediate question of China’s tacit support for Russia before and in the wake of the invasion of Ukraine can be seen as part of concern about a Sino-Russian alliance that has been growing over the last decade. The relationship between China and Russia has been [carefully scrutinized](#) for points of tension as well as cohesion.

Clearly the Ukraine crisis has brought the EU and US closer together in terms of political and military cooperation. This includes a reinvigoration of NATO in Europe. However, how and why this will lead to closer cooperation in the Indo-Pacific is far less clear. Indeed there has even been speculation that the Ukraine crisis will lead a renewed EU willingness to bolster its own security in Europe, with less US support, while the US focuses on the Indo-Pacific. Ultimately, the war in Ukraine does little to change the fundamental calculations of the EU, the US, or other key actors in the Indo-Pacific with regard to concerns, interests, or opportunities in the region. In this respect, it is useful to note the areas of overlap and divergence between the EU, the US and other supposedly “like-minded” actors in the Indo-Pacific, and then considering whether the Ukraine crisis changes these.

Here it is worth revisiting the EU’s key rationales and priorities for its September 2021 Indo-Pacific strategy. In terms of rationale, the EU emphasized its economic interdependence with the region, the range of common challenges faced (e.g., climate and health), and the need to work cooperatively on challenges and opportunities. It also stressed concerns about US-China rivalry and worries about the erosion of democratic principles and human rights in the region. Against this backdrop, the EU’s strategy called for prioritizing seven areas (in the following order): sustainable and inclusive prosperity; green transition; ocean governance; digital governance and partnerships; connectivity; security and defense; and human security.

Looking at possible overlap between the EU and US approaches to the Indo-Pacific, there are certainly areas of congruence. These are areas which officials from both sides emphasized during the previously mentioned discussion sponsored by the German Marshall Fund that took place in February 2022. For example, officials on both sides mentioned cooperation on digital infrastructure platforms, on the shoring up international maritime law, and on efforts

to combat climate change, especially as it affects maritime issues in the Indo-Pacific. They also discussed broader collaboration on their respective counters to China's Belt and Road Initiative (namely the EU's Global Gateway and the US's Build Back Better World or B3W). However, these overlaps and signals of potential cooperation predated Russia's invasion of Ukraine and both the EU and the US publication of official Indo-Pacific strategies, which were published in September 2021 and February 2022 respectively. If anything, the Biden administration incorporated some of the language, tone, and priorities of the EU strategy into the US strategy. This is something that, in the discussions in February, Rapp-Hooper was keen to emphasize formed part of a broader US commitment to working with allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific.

However, despite such overt signs of convergence in vision and priorities, fundamental differences in their respective approaches remain. Neither the Ukraine crisis, nor the seemingly more EU-friendly Indo-Pacific Strategy published by the US administration in February 2022, have altered these underlying differences. The first issue is China. The US continues to emphasize China as the key concern, or threat, that is underpinning the need for US-led cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. This is something that the February 2022 [US Indo-Pacific strategy document](#) makes clear:

“intensifying American focus [on the region] is due in part to the fact that the Indo-Pacific faces mounting challenges, particularly from the [People's Republic of China] PRC. The PRC is combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological might as it pursues a sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific and seeks to become the world's most influential power. The PRC's coercion and aggression spans the globe, but it is most acute in the Indo-Pacific.”⁶

⁶ The US Indo-Pacific strategy statement on the People's Republic of China (PRC) continues, “From the economic coercion of Australia to the conflict along the Line of Actual Control with India to the growing pressure on Taiwan and bullying of neighbors in the East and South China Seas, our allies and partners in the region bear much of the cost of the PRC's harmful behavior. In the process, the PRC is also undermining human rights and international law, including freedom of navigation, as well as other principles that have brought stability and prosperity to the Indo-Pacific.”

The EU, and its individual member states, may agree to some aspects of these claims at the centre of the US focus on the region. However, concerns about China are not the EU's primary focus. Instead, the EU's Indo-Pacific approach emphasizes "cooperation" and non-exclusivity, including regarding China. Many of the potential areas of EU-US cooperation that are outlined in their respective Indo-Pacific strategies are based on concerns about, or competition with, China. However, neither the EU as a whole, nor most member states, are likely to openly, strongly, or in any unified way commit to an approach to the Indo-Pacific that is framed or primarily motivated to counter China.

The second and related difference in European and US approaches to the Indo-Pacific concerns security and economics. The EU and the US are likely to continue to diverge in their emphasis on hard security versus economic issues as the primary rationale for "strategic" engagement with the Indo-Pacific. The US strategy document emphasizes the continued key importance of bolstering formal security alliances and partnerships in the region. It notes: "We will more tightly integrate our efforts across warfighting domains and the spectrum of conflict to ensure that the United States, alongside our allies and partners, can dissuade or defeat aggression in any form or domain". The continued emphasis by the US on the largely military-focused Quad and AUKUS have thus far demonstrated how central, traditional, and China-oriented security collaboration lies at the heart of actual US actions in the Indo-Pacific.⁷

For the EU, the picture is different. While there is language in the EU strategy about regional security concerns, including maritime issues, there is a far greater emphasis on engaging with the region and especially with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The strategy describes how this engagement is needed because of the region's economic importance for Europe and because of the need to collaboratively tackle shared threats such as climate change and health crises. If anything, the Ukraine crisis will push the EU to emphasize that its primary security concerns are in Europe itself. It will make the EU increasingly sensitive to China's ability to affect European economic and other security

⁷ The US document, and more recent statements, have tried to change the impression that the US is emphasizing military issues to the detriment of economic or other issues. Yet skepticism abounds, as seen in this [CSIS report](#) on the new "Indo-Pacific Economic Framework" or this [Financial Times article](#) on the general lack of an effective economic component to the Biden administration's approach to China.

balances. It is not that Europe is likely to de-emphasize traditional, hard security concerns in the Indo-Pacific in the wake of the Ukraine crisis, but rather that these concerns were never the primary focus of the EU's strategy in the first place. If anything, the clear emphasis in the EU strategy on concerns about the destabilizing influence of the US-China rivalry in the Indo-Pacific is as pertinent as ever.

3. Ideology and Like-mindedness: What is Missing?

The August 2021 LeidenAsiaCentre report on European approaches to the Indo-Pacific highlights two significant issues: First, it describes how EU and member state approaches to the region diverged from US efforts to steer regional collaboration regarding China and hard security. Second, it notes that in terms of priorities, the question of “values, democracy, and human rights” in European engagement with the Indo-Pacific would remain a key topic and would likely be fraught. In light of the Ukraine crisis, including Sino-Russian solidarity and cooperation, and in light of the continued emphasis on the emerging battle between democracy versus autocracy from the US Biden administration, a major question for EU engagement with the Indo-Pacific is how much and how effectively it will pursue such a values and ideology-based approach. The US has been keen to emphasize that it sees Europe as a natural partner in the renewed contest between democracies and autocracies (like Russia and China). This was stressed in Kurt Campbell’s February statements about the US approach to the Indo-Pacific and cooperation with the EU. He also emphasized confidence that alignment on such an approach is mirrored in the Indo-Pacific itself, highlighting Japanese and South Korean cooperation on Russian sanctions.

However, the claim that most countries in the Indo-Pacific are in agreement with such a specific framing, and the idea of a broader ideological, democracy-versus-autocracy contest, is deeply flawed. During the Ukraine crisis, and with the notable exceptions of Japan and Australia, few of the countries in the Indo-Pacific that are at the heart of either the EU or US strategies toward the region have lined up to condemn Russia. Few of them have voiced support for the idea that the war should mark the definitive start to a long-term, unified campaign against autocracies such as Russia and China. Both ASEAN and India are at the core of the EU’s (and the US’s) approach to the Indo-Pacific. However, these actors’ reticence to criticize or punish Russia, let alone China, marks a glaring hole in claims that key members of the Indo-Pacific are “like-minded” about the need for a sustained, long-term, ideology-based approach to regional cooperation. Of course, such issues also lie at the heart of problems with placing China at the core of Indo-Pacific strategies and cooperation.

The potential long-term success of European, American, or other approaches to the Indo-Pacific hinges on whether the “like-mindedness” of actors in the region has been thoroughly understood and not just assumed. Yet the true range of Indo-Pacific regional concerns, and aspirations, risks being obscured amidst polarized and simplified claims about democracy versus autocracy. Responses to the Ukraine crisis that don’t align with European or American expectations or desires are just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the challenges of effective engagement with the region. It can be asked to what extent the approaches to the Indo-Pacific of both the EU, and its member states, actually engaged with and understood what countries and people in the region want and need.

The politicians who have formulated Indo-Pacific policy documents for their country or for the EU claim that they have taken on board the views of the countries and people of the region. For their part, US officials confidently proclaim that their Indo-Pacific strategy is completely in line with the views and desires of “allies and partners” in the region. As noted below, such claims exaggerate the importance of Japan’s Indo-Pacific focus, especially under Abe Shinzo. However, the task of understanding and responding to the broader region is extremely complex, given the diversity and size of the region, and given the limited resources and knowledge about the region in both Europe and the US. Ultimately, the official European and American “strategies” reflect the interests and priorities of the EU, the US, or whatever government or dominant politician is formulating them.

Here, the case of Japan and its response to the Ukraine crisis offers a number of telling insights about the complexity and cross-cutting interests of key Indo-Pacific actors. Japan, under Prime Minister Kishido Fumio, has denounced Russia’s invasion and come out strongly in support of US and European sanctions against Russia. Particularly through its role in the G7, Japan has emphasized the need for like-minded countries to condemn Russia’s behaviour. It has also [warned](#) that “Ukraine may be East Asia tomorrow”, describing the potential dangers to the region if a powerful neighbour were to make a unilateral attempt to alter the status quo (e.g., China and Taiwan). Such sentiments have certainly factored into European and American claims about the likelihood of cooperation with local allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific in the wake of the Ukraine crisis. Indeed, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz visited Japan in late April, [stating](#): “My trip is a clear political signal that Germany and the European Union will

continue and intensify their engagement with the Indo-Pacific region.” Since that time, Japan has been specially active in promoting solidarity with the West in response to Chinese efforts to pressure Taiwan militarily or economically.

In these ways, Japan has emphasized its solidarity with the US and Europe over Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and the need to demonstrate to China the economic and security effectiveness of that solidarity. However, Japan’s own strategy for the Indo-Pacific itself is likely to remain fundamentally unchanged for two primary reasons. The first is that Japan’s deep economic interdependence with China, and with the region more generally, has meant that its approach and partnerships in the region are aimed at rules-based openness and based on its competitive role in infrastructure development rather than being focused on direct and open confrontation with China, per se. The second reason is that, after the Ukraine crisis, Japan has had only limited success in getting countries in key parts of the region, such as members of ASEAN and India, to condemn Russia or to agree to cooperate on sanctions. It has also been unsuccessful in getting these countries to engage in a broad-based coalition of democracies against autocracies (including China). If US or EU officials are inclined to think that the Ukraine crisis has enhanced the chances for greater Indo-Pacific solidarity in opposition to China, Japan’s experience should serve as a sobering corrective.

Japan will likely continue to be a key advocate for enhanced European, US, and Asian partnership in the Indo-Pacific. However, it will do so in ways that reflect its own embeddedness, understanding, and interests in the region. Doubtless, the key themes that Japan has promoted as part of its long-standing Indo-Pacific strategy, including its emphasis on “high-quality infrastructure”, will continue to influence EU and US alternatives to China’s BRI. However, such an approach underscores Japan’s own familiarity and experience in engaging with regional partners, especially in Southeast Asia, and via its role in key regional institutions such as the Asian Development Bank. Yet as adept as Japan has been in striking a balance between its own interdependence with China and competing with China for economic and political influence in places like Southeast Asia, it has been equally as adept in its Indo-Pacific diplomacy of providing a blueprint for countries like the US to take a more

confrontational approach to China.⁸ Countries cooperating with Japan on its vision for the Indo-Pacific therefore need to be clear-eyed about when and how their interests and aims in the region are truly aligned.

As the case of Japan highlights, European or US Indo-Pacific strategies will need to pay far greater attention to the diversity of voices and views within the region itself. An emphasis on bread-and-butter economic development issues will remain central to many. Meanwhile concerns about shared governance challenges will also be prominent. To be sure, European and US Indo-Pacific strategies already make an effort to account for such issues to a certain extent. However, insofar as they attempt to frame China, and its form of government, as the main “problem” to be struggled against or opposed, they will be severely limited in terms of resonance and cooperation in the broader region. Countries and citizens, from India to Southeast Asia to the Pacific islands, certainly do worry about the many challenges posed by China’s greater role and influence. However, they also recognize that China is not going away and that their economic and security fortunes are inevitably tied to finding ways to better understand and interact with it on their own terms. Nowhere will it be more of a challenge for Europe and the United States to strike a balance economic opportunity security tensions, and shared governance challenges than in the Indo-Pacific.

⁸ Elements of this effective diplomacy are explored in Micheal Green’s new book on Abe’s foreign policy.