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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Russia–Ukraine war and inter-state dynamics in the Indo-Pacific

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Abstract

This special issue analyses how the war in Ukraine has been perceived and interpreted by some of the major states in the Indo-Pacific and what their primary policy responses have been. It assesses the geopolitical, geostrategic, and geo-economic challenges faced by these countries as a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, with a particular focus on how they affect (and potentially transform) inter-state relations within the region. Some key themes emerge from the special issue. First, the 'neutral' positions adopted by many countries are nuanced, differ considerably from each other and have different rationales. Second, many governments in the Indo-Pacific have drawn a connection between Russia's conduct in Ukraine and China's potential near-future conduct in the region. Third, while the war has not fundamentally changed alignment dynamics in the Indo-Pacific, it has intensified a broader process of geopolitical bloc building which has been ongoing for a long time.

Keywords Russia–Ukraine war · Indo-Pacific · US-EU-NATO · ASEAN-Quad-AUKUS

Introduction

Russian President Vladimir Putin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, his subsequent open-ended military campaign against the Ukrainian state, and his annexation of large swathes of Ukrainian territory have been described as a dramatic inflection point in world politics, as well as an apparent point-of-no-return for Russia's relations with the West. While European and North American scholars and policymakers have overwhelmingly portrayed the conflict in Ukraine as a momentous event similar in magnitude to the terrorist attacks of

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11 September 2001 or the end of the Cold War, in other parts of the world, governments and societies have not necessarily attributed the same importance to the events in Ukraine and have shown widely varying outlooks and affinities on questions surrounding the causes of the conflict and the best strategies to resolve it. Different states perceive themselves to be affected by the conflict to varying degrees and in different ways. This notwithstanding, it is undeniable that the Russia–Ukraine war has had direct and indirect strategic, political, and economic consequences for most of the world—also and especially the Indo-Pacific region.

This special issue provides an analysis of how the war in Ukraine has been perceived and interpreted by some of the major states in the Indo-Pacific and what the primary policy responses in these states have been. It assesses the geopolitical, geostrategic, and geo-economic challenges faced by the Indo-Pacific countries as a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, with a particular focus on how they affect (and potentially transform) inter-state relations within the region. Individual articles focus on China, India, Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, Australia, and South Korea. For each state, the authors have analysed responses to the events in Ukraine and Russia, observing the extent to which these events led to policy changes. The authors examined the major Indo-Pacific countries' reactions to and perceptions of the war, specifically:

- how much importance they attribute to the events in Ukraine and the associated costs or benefits from the conflict for their respective country;
- how they interpret the reasons and responsibility for the war and in what ways it has affected their bilateral (political, economic, diplomatic, strategic) ties with Russia;
- what impact they think the invasion of Ukraine has had on the Indo-Pacific region as a whole;
- to what extent the conflict has intensified rivalries or cooperation between countries in the region, specifically in their country's relationship with other Indo-Pacific states;
- what impact (if any) they think the war has had on regional organisations such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), or regional alliance frameworks such as AUKUS and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), as well as bilateral alliances and alignments.

The remainder of this introductory article proceeds as follows: The first section briefly discusses the course of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its immediate repercussions, including for Russia's status as a major power in international affairs. The second section explores the war's global consequences, including commodity shortages, rising inflation, and a slowdown of worldwide economic growth, as well as its (geo)political and ideological repercussions. The third section examines the concept, terminology, and delimitation of the 'Indo-Pacific', followed by another section that provides a brief contextual overview of the inter-state dynamics in the region, particularly the prevalent rivalries, alignments, alliances, and institutional ties. The penultimate section outlines the structure and

contents of this special issue, providing a brief synopsis of the main findings of each individual article, followed by a concise evaluation.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine

On 24 February 2022, after months of uncertainty about Moscow's motives and objectives, Russian troops invaded Ukraine—or, more accurately, those parts of Ukraine which Moscow was not yet directly or indirectly controlling, following its earlier intervention in 2014 and the annexation of Crimea. Various explanations have been provided to describe Putin's likely rationale for the invasion, including Ukraine's prospective future membership of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the threat this might pose to Russia's national security, Putin's belief system and visions of history, nationalism, and irredentism, as well as his perception of a vibrant democracy in Ukraine as a potential challenge to Russia's autocratic political system, considering the sociocultural, and historical similarities between the two countries (Düben 2022). Prior to the invasion, the US and its allies (especially the UK) had provided extensive intelligence reports highlighting Russia's plans to invade Ukraine. By making the intelligence public in almost real time, Washington wanted to expose and disrupt Putin's planned offensive (Borger and Sabbagh 2022). At the time, the Kremlin categorically denied it had plans to invade Ukraine and dismissed Western reports as anti-Russian propaganda and warmongering. These intelligence reports, although correct, were unable to prevent Russia's full-scale invasion. However, they made it harder for Putin to prevail in the ensuing information war and to justify the invasion by deflecting culpability and spreading disinformation. This also allowed the US and Europe to build broader public support and devise a sharper response to Moscow's aggression against Kyiv (Brandt 2022).

As the invasion progressed, most of Putin's plans for Ukraine have evidently gone awry. Moscow apparently believed that it would capture Kyiv within the space of a few days, install a pro-Russian leader, conquer and potentially annex some key cities and territories in Ukraine, and swiftly achieve its political and strategic objectives, particularly to permanently retain Ukraine within its own geopolitical orbit. Facing repeated military reversals, however, Russia soon had to withdraw its troops from the northern regions of Ukraine adjacent to Kyiv, Chernihiv, and Sumy (while continuing to target them with intense air and missile strikes). It then redoubled its offensive in the eastern Donbas region, only to be forced into further partial retreats near Kharkiv in north-eastern Ukraine and around Kherson in southern Ukraine. Since November 2022, the strategic situation on the battlefield has largely been stagnant, although fighting remains fierce and the human toll remains very high on both sides, in what is now essentially a war of attrition. In an exceptional breach of international law (which remains unrecognised by any but a handful of states), Moscow formally annexed conquered Ukrainian territories into the sovereign territory of the Russian Federation, and there is little to indicate that Putin has downsized his long-term strategic goals in Ukraine.

Since Western states continue to supply Ukraine with large volumes of sophisticated military equipment, Russia now finds itself in the midst of a lengthy, grinding

conflict which, according to most analysts, may last for years. Russia's strategy of trying to capture city by city in a war of attrition, with little regard for civilian casualties, and the abundant evidence of severe war crimes and human rights abuses being committed in territories under Russian control, contributed to international outrage about the invasion. Among Ukraine's Western allies, it strengthened their resolve to sever all ties with Putin's government and to try to isolate Russia in the global arena. But outside of Europe and North America, this objective met with a tepid response, and even among Kyiv's Western partners the willingness to support and bankroll Ukraine's resistance has visibly declined over time.

The final outcome of the Russia–Ukraine war is impossible to foresee. The West's resolute and largely united response to Putin's invasion has undermined Russia's material capabilities, which will negatively affect its position as a great power in global affairs. Russia's economy has been targeted in a number of ways, including financial sanctions, the reduction and ban of imports of certain goods and services, a ban on technology transfers and Russian investments in certain countries, as well as other restrictive measures. While Russia's economy has defied the predictions of many analysts and remains afloat, particularly due to an invigoration of trade with the emerging economies of Asia, its growth potential has nonetheless been largely stunted for the foreseeable future, threatening the disintegration of the modern and outward-looking parts of its economy. The sanctions also impact Russia's military and defence industry, because they render it more difficult for Moscow to replenish spare parts for its advanced weapon systems and other military resources expended in the Ukraine war which are reliant on foreign high-technology imports, thus preventing Russia from keeping pace with technological developments elsewhere. The bulk of Russia's military hardware has already been decimated during fighting in Ukraine (along with the nimbus of Russia being a formidable military power), and it is unclear how long it will take to rebuild it. As Russia becomes strategically weaker, it has striven to re-orientate its economic, diplomatic, and military ties towards sympathetic great and middle powers, including in the Indo-Pacific region—above all its strategic partnership with China (wherein Moscow is increasingly being demoted from a great power peer to a client of Beijing) (Verma and Düben 2023). This, in turn, has ramifications across the globe, especially in the Indo-Pacific, where a worsening Sino-US rivalry is playing out simultaneously.

Global impact and perception of the Russia–Ukraine war

Unlike many other recent military conflicts, the Russia–Ukraine war is pitting some of the world's major powers and leading economies against each other—not in a direct military confrontation, but in a form of warfare by proxy (including the distant risk of a future escalation into nuclear war). Consequently, the ripple effects of the conflict have been felt the world over.

In *economic* terms, Russia's invasion (and the West's reaction to it) has disrupted trade and investment and propelled worldwide inflation, leading to shortages of energy, agricultural goods, and other essential commodities across many regions of the globe. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), global annual

consumer price inflation rose to 8.8 per cent in 2022, its highest level since 1996. Aggregate inflation in emerging markets and developing countries reached around 9.9 per cent, its highest level since 1999, while inflation in advanced economies, at 7.3 per cent, was the highest since 1982 (IMF 2023a: 5; IMF 2023b).

Russia and Ukraine are both key exporters of wheat, together accounting for about one-quarter of global wheat exports prior to the invasion, and Russia is also the world's largest exporter of fertilisers. Largely as a result of the conflict, the Food and Agriculture Organization's (FAO) food price index, which tracks international prices of the most globally traded food commodities, rose to an average of 143.7 points in 2022, up 14.3 per cent from 2021 and the highest since records started in 1990 (De La Hamaide 2023). Similar price hikes occurred in the energy markets, since Russia is the world's largest exporter of natural gas and accounts for a significant share of global crude oil and coal exports. Global (Brent crude) oil prices temporarily soared to more than US$120 a barrel in June 2022 and averaged ca. US$100 a barrel throughout 2022. The European benchmark natural gas price experienced a record-high annual increase of 150 per cent in 2022 (hitting US$70/mmbtu in August 2022), and despite a subsequent decline it was still 133 per cent above its 2015–19 average by March 2023 (although gas price increases were more moderate in other parts of the world). Global coal prices underwent a similar trajectory (World Bank 2023: 9–14).

Western sanctions against Moscow—particularly those imposed on Russia's financial industry—exacerbated uncertainties in international trade and posed challenges for the global transport and logistics sector, encumbering goods trade at a time when it was still beset by Covid-19-related problems and backlogs. Overall, global economic growth in 2022 slowed to 3.4 per cent (from 6.2 per cent in 2021) and projections for the following years are even lower (IMF 2023a: 6). In many of the world's developing countries and emerging economies, these additional economic turbulences have severely adversely affected economic baselines, often contributing to acute standard-of-living crises.

Beyond the economic dimension, the Russia–Ukraine war is also having a multitude of *(geo)political and ideological* repercussions across the world. The collective response by governments in Western Europe and the Anglosphere has been remarkably coherent and united (although there are strong signs that this unity and commitment is gradually fraying). As a direct consequence of Russia's invasion, military budgets among Washington's allies are rising, NATO is expanding its membership, and the West's military presence near Russia's borders has been substantially enhanced (in a diametric reversal of Putin's stated objectives for the war). US allies in East Asia, such as Japan, South Korea, and Australia have joined in many of Washington's forceful punitive measures against Russia (albeit with varying levels of commitment).

But outside the US-led alliance system, the response to Russia's invasion has been much more ambivalent. The statements of most policymakers in non-Western great and middle powers, developing countries, and emerging economies, as well as their voting records in international institutions, such as the United Nations (UN), have demonstrated that most of them have been hesitant or unwilling to condemn or chastise Russia to the extent that most Western governments have. And while

it is difficult to gauge public opinion on this issue across the globe, solidarity with Ukraine appears to be tepid overall. In large parts of the world, there is no dearth of public support for Vladimir Putin and his war aims. At the same time, however, there have also been concerns in many governments, particularly among small and middle powers, about whether the Russian example of great power territorial expansion through military conquest might be emulated by other powerful states in the future.

On an ideological and geostrategic level, there is now an acute sensation among many observers that the Russia–Ukraine war might be one of the opening salvos in a broader systemic conflict between 'West' and 'East', democracy and authoritarianism, perhaps even a 'new Cold War', which many international observers have been anticipating for a long time. For many governments, an important goal amidst this deepening dichotomy of 'democracies versus autocracies' is to avoid having to firmly commit themselves to either side in this incipient great power confrontation (despite a perceived pressure to pick a side), not least so as to avoid imperilling their economic and diplomatic links with either of the opposed camps. While the impact and perceptions of the Russia–Ukraine war have thus been diverse in different parts of the world, the articles in this special issue are focusing specifically on reactions to the war among the countries of the Indo-Pacific region.

The (disputed) concept of the Indo-Pacific and variegated Indo-Pacific strategies

After the end of the Cold War, the Indo-Pacific has emerged as the new centre of global economic activity and the balance of power. This is predominantly due to the rapid (economic, political, military, and diplomatic) rise of both China and India and their expanding interests in the region and beyond. China's rise has fuelled particular anxieties in the US, Japan, Australia, and India, leading to the creation of the Indo-Pacific construct to balance or hedge against a Sino-centric regional order. These countries are also concerned about China challenging the existing international rules-based order, with the four capitals advancing the 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' strategy to promote a status-quo oriented rules-based order in the region. China's rise has challenged 'Pax Americana', with the Indo-Pacific being the primary arena in which Sino-US rivalry is playing out. The US perceives India as a lynchpin in its strategy of balancing and/or containing a rising and assertive China. Rex Tillerson, the former US Secretary of State, stated in 2017 that India and the US should serve as 'the eastern and the western beacons' of the Indo-Pacific (US Department of State 2017). The Biden administration has likewise time and again stressed the important role that India plays as a net security provider in the region and for an open and safe Indo-Pacific (US Department of Defense 2022; White House 2023). The Indo-Pacific has also become pertinent in light of Alfred Mahan's stress on sea/naval power and Nicholas Spykman's stress on both land/continental and sea power, with Spykman referring to the waters between the western Pacific and the Bay of Bengal as the 'circumferential maritime highway which links the whole area together in terms of sea power' (Scott 2012: 88).

The Indo-Pacific as a region (that is the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, perceived as one contiguous area) is constructed through politics. The Constructivist school of thought in International Relations has provided numerous insights into regionalism. According to Peter Katzenstein, 'regions are, among other things, social constructions created through politics […], cognitive constructs that are rooted in political practice' (Katzenstein 2002: 105). For instance, in the 1980s and 1990s regional discourse was centred around the 'Pacific Rim', with institutional arrangements like the Asia–Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and the attendant economic opportunities and benefits. Consequently, the twenty-first century being the 'Pacific Century' became a cliché (Cumings 1998).

Pardesi (2020) conceives of the Indo-Pacific as a strategic region which is different from the wider international system for three reasons. First, the most important states in the region or the geographical cluster interact with each other in a political and military sense (it is the political and military and not cultural factors which lead to the development of the region in the initial stages). Second, the geographical cluster forms a mental image of a geographical unit in the minds of the leaders of the most important states in the region, and these perceptions lead to the development of the boundaries and membership of the region. Third, it derives from the strategic behaviour and perceptions of great powers, because great powers tailor their foreign policies in different regions to their individual circumstances.

The Indo-Pacific: a contested construct

In the early decades of the twenty-first century, more and more countries have been replacing 'Asia–Pacific' with 'Indo-Pacific' as a geographical and strategic construct of geopolitical and geo-economic importance (with Australia being the first country to officially use the 'Indo-Pacific' construct in its 2013 Defence White Paper). Regional organisations such as ASEAN (ASEAN 2019) and supranational organisations such as the European Union (EU) (EU 2022) are also increasingly employing the 'Indo-Pacific' terminology en lieu of 'Asia–Pacific'. However, countries such as China and Russia perceive the 'Indo-Pacific' as an artificial construct devised by the US and its strategic partners and aimed at containing China's rise in the region. Consequently, they continue to use the term 'Asia–Pacific'. While some analysts, such as Chilamkuri Rajamohan (2012), Rory Medcalf (2013), and David Scott (2012), have promoted the 'Indo-Pacific' concept, 'pessimists' such as Nick Bisley and Andrew Phillips have urged the US to adhere to the terminology of the 'Asia–Pacific' (Bisley and Phillips 2013).

A specific point of disagreement is whether the concept of the 'Indo-Pacific' is maritime in nature or encompasses both the continental and maritime domains. For Medcalf (2013) and Bisley and Phillips (2013), the Indo-Pacific idea is about maritime Asia, but Pardesi (2020) argues that the concept encapsulates both the maritime and continental domains. This is because first, although the US is the most dominant naval power in the region (and globally) and US allies such as Japan and Australia are island states, China and India are formidable land powers (although both possess significant and rapidly rising naval capabilities as well). Second, not only does

China's 'Belt and Road Initiative' encompass both the continental and maritime dimensions, but the interdependence between land power and sea power implies that the Asian landmass cannot be ignored in the strategic architecture emerging in the Indo-Pacific.

There is also disagreement between countries and even *within* individual countries regarding the geographical expanse of the term 'Indo-Pacific', with policy developments leading to gradual changes in the definition. For instance, the US has had different interpretations of the 'Indo-Pacific' during the Obama and Trump administrations, and Japan's definition has the largest geographical expanse relative to those of the other 'Quad' countries (the US, India, and Australia). It is important to understand each country's specific geographical definition of the 'Indo-Pacific' for the following reasons: First, the geographical expanse determines the policies that a country makes and implements. A lack of comprehension of others' definitions might have a negative impact on collaboration and dialogue and may also create mistrust between countries. Second, a change in the definition or the geographical expanse of the 'Indo-Pacific' implies a change in policy, for no country would ordinarily change the definition of a key concept once it has accepted the concept as a political symbol (Haruko 2020).

The Indo-Pacific construct vs. the Indo-Pacific strategy

It is also important to distinguish between the Indo-Pacific construct and the Indo-Pacific strategy. An Indo-Pacific maritime region is being shaped and conceptualised by political practices across the region (Scott 2012). These practices involve inter-state operations, be it at the bilateral, trilateral, or multilateral level, including military (naval) exercises and institutional frameworks, which merge the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean into one contiguous region. The region then leads to the creation of a strategy to operate in the region. Thus, the Indo-Pacific strategy makes the Indo-Pacific concept operational (through practical agreements, formal and informal understandings—say in the Quad—and the deployment of tangible assets by different countries in the region) and facilitates the conceptualisation of the Indo-Pacific construct.

Different countries in the region not only have different definitions of the 'Indo-Pacific', but also different Indo-Pacific strategies (including the four Quad countries, which promote and espouse 'a free and open Indo-Pacific'). For instance, the main objective of the US Indo-Pacific strategy under the Trump and Biden administrations has been to contain China's rise and preserve US primacy in the region. Under the Trump administration, Barack Obama's 'pivot to Asia' or 'Asia–Pacific rebalance' strategy was expanded and revised. On the other hand, India's strategy has been different from that of the US. India seeks to maximise its national interests by following an inclusive Indo-Pacific strategy. New Delhi neither envisages the region or the strategy as a limited members' club, nor as a grouping that seeks to contain or dominate a specific country. Unlike the US, New Delhi does not perceive its strategy to be directed against any country, including China. Similarly, Japan's strategy has diverged from that of the US, because it posits ASEAN and not India as its

focal point. It also includes China, because Tokyo has robust economic and commercial ties with Beijing and does not want to be perceived as containing China. Moreover, Indonesia and the ASEAN states have a different Indo-Pacific strategy relative to those of the Quad countries, with an increasing focus on ASEAN centrality, inclusivity, economics and cooperation, and including China (Choong 2019; Haruko 2020).

Inter-state dynamics in the Indo-Pacific: rivalries, alignments, alliances, and institutional ties

The Indo-Pacific consists of three sub-regions: Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, and South Asia. The relationship dynamics between the different states in this vast region are extremely complex. One of the crucial components of these dynamics is an array of bilateral rivalries of varying scale and intensity between the states in the region. On a macro-level, the most structurally important strategic rivalry is that between Beijing and Washington. The US, despite not being geographically located in the Indo-Pacific region, has been inextricably tied to it through its pervasive institutional and alliance networks. Its overarching strategic rivalry with China, which is playing out at a geopolitical, geo-economic, military, diplomatic, and ideological level, has intensified throughout the past several years. It is linked to and interwoven with many of the bilateral rivalries between states in the region, most of which directly or indirectly involve China.

The US retains its decades-old 'hub and spoke' alliance system in East Asia, comprising bilateral alliance links with Japan, South Korea, and Australia, as well as complex military ties of varying intensity with Taiwan, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. Many of these states have long-standing bilateral rivalries of their own with (or involving) China, each of which, should it escalate, carries the risk of drawing Washington into a direct military confrontation with Beijing.

Foremost among these is the rivalry between China and Japan, which has deep historic roots and regularly erupts into bilateral tensions. In recent years, these tensions have most frequently been centred around rivalling territorial claims to the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands in the East China Sea (one of the flashpoints where a future armed conflict in the Indo-Pacific is likely to erupt), while Japan also has an unresolved territorial dispute with Russia over the South Kuril islands which has been straining Tokyo's relations with Moscow for decades, as well as a more low-key dispute with South Korea over the Liancourt Rocks islets.

A more distinct bilateral rivalry involving one of Washington's regional allies is the ongoing military standoff between South Korea and North Korea. This frozen conflict has worsened considerably in recent years, on account of Pyongyang's increasingly successful attempts to acquire nuclear weapons, making it another primary flashpoint in the region where the risk of a future armed conflict is particularly high. Due to North Korea's status as Beijing's only formal treaty ally, the ongoing hostility between Seoul and Pyongyang also indirectly involves China (and, to a lesser extent, Russia), while shared strategic concerns about North Korea have

provided some common ground in the otherwise fraught relationship between South Korea and Japan.

A third crucial bilateral rivalry (and a third potential military flashpoint) in the region is the enmity between Mainland China and Taiwan, which Beijing regards as a renegade province. Recent years have seen Beijing continuously dialling up the (military, economic, and diplomatic) pressure against Taipei, leaving analysts increasingly worried that, in the near future, China might ponder a military invasion across the Taiwan Strait, following the precedent set by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. While there are no formal alliance ties between Washington and Taipei, such a conflict would likely draw in the US, which has guaranteed to provide Taiwan with all necessary means to defend itself against a Chinese assault. In recent years, Japan has also been concerned about China's increasing bellicosity towards Taiwan, with Tokyo hinting in 2021 that it will come to Taiwan's aid if it is attacked by China. This has further raised the stakes in the region and the prospect that a war over Taiwan could quickly escalate into a region-wide conflagration.

A newer bilateral fault line which has widened considerably in recent years is the rivalry between China and Australia (and, to a lesser extent, neighbouring New Zealand). While the growing tensions between Beijing and Canberra have so far largely been limited to commercial and trade disputes, they have also acquired a more geopolitical dimension in light of China's increasing strategic presence in the southwestern Pacific and Australia's efforts to bolster its alliance ties with the US and the UK through the new AUKUS trilateral security pact and the long-standing 'Five Eyes' intelligence alliance.

Another constant source of tensions involving various states in the region has been China's strategy of territorial expansion in the South China Sea—yet another principal flashpoint in the region and one of the likeliest sites for the eruption of armed hostilities in the future. Beijing's extremely expansive and highly contested sovereignty claims have pitted it against a variety of ASEAN member states adjoining the South China Sea, most notably Vietnam and the Philippines, as well as the US as a self-proclaimed custodian of the freedom of navigation.

China, which is either directly or indirectly involved in most of the inter-state rivalries in the Indo-Pacific region, has traditionally eschewed formal alliance ties (except with North Korea), but has forged increasingly close political and security relations with Russia and Pakistan. In both cases, some scholars have described the growing bilateral ties as incipient alliances or quasi-alliances, garbed in the terminology of 'strategic partnerships.' The India-China positional, spatial, strategic and enduring rivalry has become complex with the involvement of great and regional powers, including the US, Russia, Japan, and Pakistan, among others. Beijing wants a unipolar Asia and a multipolar world, with China as one of the poles. New Delhi, on the other hand, wants a multipolar Asia and a multipolar world, which is contrary to Beijing's interests and ambitions. The China-Pakistan "all weather" strategic partnership aims to tie down India in South Asia, so that New Delhi cannot challenge Beijing's quest to become the pre-eminent power in Asia. In light of the territorial dispute between Beijing and New Delhi, which temporarily erupted into Sino-Indian armed border skirmishes in 2020, India has recently broadened its security ties by enhancing its political, diplomatic, military, and strategic cooperation with

Washington and joining the revived Quad. Beijing perceives the Quad as an 'arc of democracies', or an incipient 'Asian NATO' designed to contain China, and this has further increased tensions between these countries and China. At the same time, however, India has also preserved its long-standing security ties with Russia and has been active in multilateral cooperation frameworks with both Moscow and Beijing, such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.

Overall, beneath the strategic rivalries and hostilities that characterise many of the inter-state relations in the Indo-Pacific, the states in the region are nonetheless engaged in intense mutual trade and investment relationships, particularly with the region's economic powerhouse, China. Many of the bilateral disputes (especially those involving China) have therefore remained relatively muted, notwithstanding the serious geopolitical and security risks that attach to them, since the actors involved try to avoid imperilling their lucrative commercial ties. In addition, the relations between the states of the Indo-Pacific have increasingly been conducted in the context of a regionalist framework composed of a growing number of multilateral inter-governmental organisations and treaty bodies—the most prominent being APEC and ASEAN (with its many affiliate structures, including ASEAN plus 3, ASEAN plus 6, the ASEAN Regional Forum, and the East Asia Summit)—which are primarily focused on facilitating trade and economic interaction.

On the other hand, many of the institutionalised economic, commercial, financial, and investment initiatives in the region have themselves had strong undertones of geopolitical rivalry and are commonly perceived as being dominated, respectively, by rivalling great powers: China in the case of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its subordinate institutions, as well as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership; Japan in the case of the Asian Development Bank and (effectively) the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership; the US in the case of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity, the abortive Trans-Pacific Partnership, the Build Back Better World initiative (including the Blue Dot Network initiative for infrastructure development in the Indo-Pacific and beyond, launched by the US, Japan, and Australia) and its new avatar, the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment launched by the G7 to rival China's BRI.

Structure and contents of the special issue

The seven research articles included in this special issue each describe and analyse how Russia's war against Ukraine has been perceived and evaluated by one of the major states in the Indo-Pacific and what the primary policy responses of this state have been, following the broad questions outlined at the beginning of this introductory article. Besides South Korea and Australia, which are closely allied with the US and have embraced an explicitly (though not unconditionally) pro-Ukrainian position, the remaining five states have professed neutrality in the Russia–Ukraine war. However, their 'neutral' positions are nuanced and differ considerably and in numerous ways from each other, as the contributors highlight. The rationales for their

'neutral' positions are also variegated and reflect the key features/pillars of their foreign policy.

The article about *China* by Björn Alexander Düben and Heidi Wang-Kaeding highlights that Beijing claims to have adopted a position of neutrality in the Russia–Ukraine war, although in practice it has unambiguously sided with Moscow. Unlike the West, it has not imposed sanctions on Russia and has voted against resolutions in international organisations which condemn Moscow for invading Ukraine. While Beijing has presented itself as a passive and responsible mediator in the conflict, the authors maintain that it has espoused firmly pro-Russian policies in the wake of the invasion of Ukraine, providing vital rhetorical, political, and diplomatic support to Moscow. It has also continued to engage economically with Russia, with a surge in bilateral trade and commerce that has served as an economic and geopolitical lifeline for Moscow.

The authors argue that the extent of Beijing's support for Moscow is somewhat puzzling, because its pro-Russian policy stance poses long-term geopolitical, economic, and reputational risks and costs for China. Besides increasing the risk that China may get dragged into Russia's conflicts, it raises suspicions about Beijing's future actions not only among Western states, but also in its own neighbourhood, prompting countries there to align themselves closer with the US. Furthermore, it risks jeopardising China's lucrative trade and investment links with the US and its allies and undermining its image as a champion of sovereignty and territorial integrity, which has long been the normative core of China's vision for a new global order. The authors employ Neoclassical Realism as the theoretical construct to argue that China's indirect but consistent support for Moscow is influenced both by geopolitical factors, due to its systemic rivalry with the US and its allies, and domestic factors, specifically President Xi Jinping's ideological beliefs and his concerns regarding regime security and regime survival.

In his article on *India*, Raj Verma examines why New Delhi has maintained an official stance of 'neutrality' towards the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which some analysts have described as a de facto 'subtle pro-Moscow position'. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government has neither condoned nor publicly condemned the Russian invasion (although it has indirectly criticised Russia as the war progressed). India has abstained from resolutions chastising Russia in international organisations, has not followed the US and its allies in imposing sanctions on Moscow, but has in fact substantially increased its purchases of crude oil from Russia at a discounted price. Like Beijing's, New Delhi's position is in strong contrast to the 'five principles' which are a cornerstone of its foreign policy. It appears paradoxical, especially in the context of the ongoing border standoff with China, since New Delhi has labelled Beijing as the aggressor and chastised it for violating India's territorial integrity and sovereignty.

Viewing New Delhi's reaction through the conceptual prism of 'multi-alignment', Verma outlines how India's relatively inclusive Indo-Pacific concept is influenced by a doctrine of maximising its national interests and preserving its strategic autonomy through cooperation with different countries in the region, whilst not being overly committed to any one country or side (although 'multi-alignment' does allow New Delhi to form strategic partnerships with certain countries and align itself with a

country on a specific issue). As Verma outlines, New Delhi's outlook towards the Indo-Pacific has changed following the Galwan Valley border clashes between Indian and Chinese soldiers in June 2020, and it perceives Beijing (and no longer Pakistan) as the paramount threat to its national security and territorial integrity. It has tried to reduce its economic dependence on China, aligned itself closer with the US and its allies (especially Japan), strengthened its relations with other countries in the Indo-Pacific (especially Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia), and reactivated the Quad. Verma argues that the war in Ukraine is exacerbating India's rivalry with China (and Pakistan) and further complicating New Delhi's strategic calculus, especially with respect to Russia and relations in the Indo-Pacific.

The war does not suit the Indian government, and its ambition has been to proactively bring an end to the hostilities through direct negotiations. India has adopted a 'neutral' stance because of the importance the Modi government attaches to its strategic partnership with Russia under the foreign policy doctrine of 'multi-alignment'. The most important elements of the India–Russia strategic partnership are defence and security ties and technology transfers, as India remains hugely reliant on Russia for military equipment. India thus has tried to strike a balance in its ties with Russia and the US and would ideally want both on its side to counter China. With Russia's increasing reliance on China following its invasion of Ukraine, New Delhi is apprehensive that Beijing is increasing its leverage over a weakened Moscow, putting it in a position to potentially dictate Russia's relations with countries in the Indo-Pacific (such as India and Vietnam) and to preclude Moscow from providing further sophisticated arms and equipment to India, which would widen the military gap between India and China. India might also lose Russia's diplomatic and political support in the UN Security Council on Kashmir and other vital issues. Verma concludes that, while New Delhi seeks good relations with Moscow, it will be forced to reduce its dependence on Russian arms and adjust its Indo-Pacific vision, with India likely aligning itself more closely with the US and increasing defence and security cooperation with the Quad and other like-minded countries in the Indo-Pacific.

Leonard C. Sebastian and Keoni Marzuki, in their article on *Indonesia*, highlight that like India, the Joko Widodo administration has adopted a pragmatic neutral or middle-ground position towards the Russia–Ukraine war. Jakarta has condemned the war, but has not chastised Russia and has not identified Moscow as the aggressor. Unlike the US and its allies, it has not imposed sanctions on Russia and has questioned the appropriateness of sanctions. Its position in international fora has been mixed, with Indonesia voting against Russia on resolutions which demanded the withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukraine and holding referendums in Ukrainian territories occupied by Russia, but abstaining from resolutions which sought punitive actions against Moscow. Under its G20 presidency, Jakarta invited Ukraine to the 2022 G20 summit and tried to act as a mediator to negotiate an end to the war.

Like India and China, Indonesia's 'neutral' position in practice contravenes its foreign policy pillar of '10 Bandung Principles' which stress respecting a state's territorial integrity and sovereignty. The authors argue that Indonesia's neutral policy is firmly rooted in the central foreign policy principle of 'bebas aktif', that is an independent and active foreign policy, dating back to the Cold War period when Indonesia pursued a policy of non-alignment. This entails pragmatism in Indonesia's

foreign policy, and Jakarta's neutral stance is influenced by three concrete factors. First, Jakarta does not want antagonistic ties with either Russia or Ukraine. Antagonistic ties with Moscow would create hurdles in the modernisation of Indonesia's armed forces and also affect trade (especially oil imports), which would hurt Indonesia's economic growth. Second, Indonesia's political elite has prioritised economic growth and development after the COVID-19 slowdown and was particularly focused on the success of Indonesia's G20 presidency. Third, public opinion in Indonesia has generally favoured Russia over Ukraine.

Sebastian and Marzuki contend that, from Jakarta's perspective, the Russia–Ukraine war has negative consequences for Indonesia and Southeast Asia. First, the war has undermined cohesion in ASEAN, with individual ASEAN states responding differently to the conflict, which risks compromising the principle of ASEAN centrality. Since Indonesia is central to ASEAN's Indo-Pacific strategy, its objective of pursuing a 'third way' that is an alternative to US–China rivalry and bipolarity is being undermined, which implies that Indonesia's ability to play a leadership role in the region will also be compromised. Second, the Russia–Ukraine war is exacerbating great power rivalry in the Indo-Pacific, rendering China likely to take advantage of Washington's preoccupation with Eastern Europe by pursuing an expansionist agenda in the region. US-led minilaterals, such as the Quad and AUKUS, may try to fill the strategic gap by seeking to induct new partners/allies in Southeast Asia to bolster their position with respect to China. This is also likely to undermine Indonesia's Indo-Pacific vision and its leadership in ASEAN and Southeast Asia.

In his article about the *Philippines*, Renato Cruz De Castro explains that Manila's 'mixed and sometimes muted' reaction to Russia's invasion of Ukraine was largely due to three critical concerns: the invasion's economic impact on the Indo-Pacific region, the Southeast Asian countries' wariness of antagonising China by allying too closely with the US on the issue of Ukraine, and their inclination to balance their relations with China with those with other major powers, such as the US, Japan, and Russia. Despite being a US treaty ally, the Philippine government initially declared itself neutral with regard to the war in Ukraine, but it then partially reversed course, explicitly condemning the invasion and supporting a US-co-sponsored UN General Assembly resolution on Ukraine, although it stopped short of joining Western sanctions against Russia. President Rodrigo Duterte (whose administration had previously distanced itself from the US and courted China) decided to cancel a Russian helicopter procurement deal and announced that, if the conflict were to engulf Asia, he would open the Philippines' military facilities to American forces. His successor, President Ferdinand Marcos, has since doubled down on this policy course.

In his analysis, De Castro examines the Philippine government's policy response through the conceptual prism of 'critical neutrality', which 'occupies the grey area between strict/legal neutrality and non-belligerency'. This approach 'is characterised by a stated policy of neutrality in the face of the armed conflict, occasional criticism of Russia's handling of the war […], and the willingness to host American military forces in case the armed conflict spills over to Asia'. Although the Philippines has not experienced significant economic fallout from the war, Manila is inherently opposed to great power military intervention against smaller powers and resents the

raw violation of a smaller state's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Furthermore, it realised that the Russian invasion of Ukraine has specific implications for Southeast Asia, since it could encourage China to emulate its strategic partner Russia in trying to use force to settle long-standing irredentist claims, conducting hybrid or open warfare to acquire disputed territories—particularly Taiwan, which is geographically adjacent to the Philippines—thereby causing collateral damage throughout the entire region. Beyond the issue of Taiwan, Manila has major unresolved territorial and maritime disputes with China in the South China Sea, and there is a similar danger that Beijing might escalate its current hybrid and grey zone operations there to full-scale warfare. By gravitating closer to the US, the Philippines is showing Russia and China that it is wary about the irredentist policies of these two revisionist powers. In this context, Manila has been closely examining Washington's response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine as a litmus test of how the Americans might react to the Philippines' security problems in its own maritime territories. Manila has therefore been inclined towards reviving its bilateral security ties with the US, but it remains reluctant to establish closer ties with the Quad and AUKUS, since it is still sensitive to Beijing's concerns about these new regional security arrangements.

See Seng Tan's article highlights that *Singapore*, unlike other countries in Southeast Asia and ASEAN, has unequivocally condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine and identified Russia as the aggressor. Like the US and its allies, Singapore has imposed sanctions on Russian financial institutions and on businesses backed by the Kremlin, fully aware that the sanctions can prove detrimental for the city state's status as a base for multinational resellers and wholesalers and its role as a global shipping hub. However, Singapore's government has also stated that Russia is not an enemy state, and it has described its policy on the Russia–Ukraine war as neither pro-US, nor anti-China, nor anti-Russia, but purely 'pro-Singapore.' Singapore is nonetheless widely perceived to be in the 'US camp' with regard to Ukraine.

Singapore's decision to condemn Russia for the war reflects a pragmatic calculation of national interest hinging on two factors. First, as a small power, Singapore has an avid self-interest in propagating a rules-based international order to protect the rights and interests of small states. Singapore believes that Russia's infringement on Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity is a complete violation of international norms and the UN charter and thereby poses a threat to the survival of small and weak states. Its advocacy for the rights and interest of small states is based on 'an enlightened form of self-interest'. Second, Singapore, like the Philippines, is concerned about the likelihood of being coerced to take sides in the ongoing US–China rivalry and about the strategic uncertainty that this rivalry begets. Like other states in the region, Singapore wants to maintain its strategic autonomy and champions the primacy of ASEAN centrality in the Indo-Pacific, aiming to keep the region open and inclusive and avoiding involvement in regional military alliances and US-led minilaterals.

Lavina Lee, in her article on *Australia*, highlights that Canberra's reaction to the Russia–Ukraine war is closely aligned with the reaction of the US and its allies. Australia has condemned Russia in international organisations and co-sponsored motions and resolutions criticising Moscow for invading Ukraine and for infringing on Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. It has blamed Moscow for

violating the UN Charter and international norms and for attempting to re-establish a sphere of influence reminiscent of the bygone great power era of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Canberra has also imposed diplomatic, trade, and financial sanctions on Russia and provided military and humanitarian aid to Ukraine. Both the previous Scott Morrison administration and the incumbent Anthony Albanese government have been consistent in their opposition to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, with both governments wanting to impose costs on Russia for its belligerence. Criticism of Moscow and support for Kyiv has been evidenced across the political spectrum. Public opinion in Australia has also been critical of the Russian invasion, with the public strongly supporting the Australian government's policies of imposing sanctions on Russia and providing military aid to Ukraine. Domestic political pressure, rather than external pressure from the US, has pushed Canberra to do more for Ukraine.

Lee argues that Australia's criticism of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and its strategies and responses are conditioned by and consistent with the two pillars of Australia's foreign policy, that is "middle power" traditions and being a "dependent ally" of the US. While the "dependent ally" facet is consistent with the realist school of honouring its traditional alliance with the US, with both countries adopting a strategy of pursuing a free and open Indo-Pacific region, the "middle power" pillar is based on Australia's identity and foreign policy choices and tools influenced by liberal values. In the past, there have been instances where there was a clash between the two pillars, but there is no conflict in this case.

Both the Morrison and the Albanese governments have framed the Russia–Ukraine war and their support for Ukraine as a "struggle" between a democratic bloc and an authoritarian bloc. Canberra perceives the US-led liberal world order as being threatened by authoritarian values and actions, and these will lead to global instability. There are concerns that, if Moscow is successful in its aggression against Ukraine, China—which is a key strategic partner of Russia and also seeks to undermine the liberal global order, establish a sphere of influence, indulge in historical irredentism and revise borders—will take a cue from Moscow and undertake aggressive action against Taiwan and other states in the Indo-Pacific. Canberra's perceptions are influenced by the recent deterioration in Australia–China ties. Polls suggest that the general public in Australia is also concerned about China–Russia political and strategic cooperation. To overcome the autocratic challenge and deter China from aggression in the region, Canberra has increased attempts at internal balancing by augmenting its defence capabilities and reinvigorating its alliance with the US. It has also strengthened its partnerships in democratic groupings such as AUKUS and the Quad. Canberra considers these groupings and its alliance with the US central to deterring authoritarian intentions and behaviours through the institutionalisation, operationalisation, and militarisation (with respect to AUKUS) of collective democratic action in the Indo-Pacific.

In their more policy-driven article on *South Korea*, Ramon Pacheco Pardo and Saeme Kim explain that like Australia, Seoul's reaction to the war in Ukraine has been closely aligned with that of its Western democratic partners. South Korea has condemned Russia's invasion, including in UN votes and resolutions, imposed sanctions on Moscow, and provided aid and (non-lethal) military equipment to

Ukraine—positioning it as one of very few Asian countries to have provided Ukraine with such wide-ranging support. In so doing, Seoul has already incurred economic costs. Prior to 2022, Russia was South Korea's tenth-largest trading partner, considered essential for Seoul's efforts to diversify its energy supply away from the Middle East, and a key partner for its 'New Northern Policy' to link South Korea to the rest of Eurasia via North Korea. Furthermore, South Korean policy-makers saw Russia as a potentially important partner in dealing with the continuous threat posed by Pyongyang, particularly in the context of a series of renewed North Korean missile tests. South Korea's relatively robust policy response to the war in Ukraine unfolded in the context of a hectic domestic environment on account of the 2022 presidential elections. It remained consistent, despite the change of administration from the liberal Moon Jae-in to the conservative Yoon Suk-yeol on 10 May 2022, and it enjoyed broad media and public support.

Drawing on a range of personal interviews with South Korean officials, Pacheco Pardo and Kim explain Seoul's response to Russia's invasion primarily in terms of concerns about its implications for the Indo-Pacific region, particularly with regard to Taiwan and North Korea. South Korean policymakers and analysts quickly drew parallels between the situations of Ukraine and Taiwan, fearing that 'Ukraine's present could be Taiwan's future', not least because relations between Russia and China have become visibly closer since the start of Russia's invasion. In addition, South Korean government officials have indicated that there is a risk that China, North Korea, and Russia will form a bloc confronting the US-led bloc which includes South Korea, potentially hastening a "new Cold War". Seoul thus understands that there is growing rivalry within the Indo-Pacific region and that it has to work together with its preferred partners. Overall, as Pacheco Pardo and Kim point out, South Korea's government appears to perceive Russia's invasion of Ukraine as part of a widening gulf between China and its partners on the one hand and the US and its own allies, including South Korea, on the other. There is no indication that Seoul regards Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a springboard to deepen cooperation with AUKUS or the Quad (or with ASEAN). But the invasion has nonetheless boosted South Korea's links with the US, Japan, and NATO, amid the latter's expanding role in the Indo-Pacific region. Domestically, it has also served to reignite the debate about whether South Korea should acquire a nuclear deterrent—a popular idea among the South Korean public.

The articles in this special issue demonstrate that, among the different states of the Indo-Pacific, there has been a wide range of responses to, and perceptions of, Russia's war on Ukraine, and the conflict has confronted each government with a unique set of problems and opportunities. Disparate though these experiences have been, there have nonetheless been some common denominators between them and some general conclusions we can draw from this comparative study.

One of these concerns the role of China: Although China is not directly involved in the Russia–Ukraine war, it nonetheless plays an essential role in how the war is perceived and the reactions it has prompted in practically all other states of the Indo-Pacific. For most of these states, the direct and immediate fallout of the war, which is very distant from their shores, has not been particularly great. Russia has not been an exceedingly influential actor in the Indo-Pacific region, particularly in

economic terms, while relations with Ukraine have been all but negligible for most of these states. China, however, is of tremendous importance throughout the region. Owing to China's increasingly close partnership with Russia and their shared systemic rivalry with the US and its allies, many governments in the Indo-Pacific have drawn a connection between Russia's conduct in Ukraine and China's potential near-future conduct in its own neighbourhood—a consistent theme emphasised by most of the authors of this special issue. For this reason, these governments have been closely watching the reaction of other powers, particularly the US and its allies, to Russia's conduct in Ukraine. The war is being viewed through the prism of China, both among those states that consider themselves Beijing's partners and those that consider themselves its rivals.

Another observation concerns the war's impact on alignments and alliances in the Indo-Pacific. There is no indication that the war has fundamentally changed alignment dynamics, but it appears to have intensified a broader process of geopolitical bloc building which has been ongoing for a long time. Amid deepening Sino-US tensions in recent years, the pressure for smaller states in the region to align with Beijing or Washington has consistently grown. The Russia–Ukraine war, irrespective of how geographically distant it is from the Indo-Pacific, has visibly strengthened this alignment pressure—notwithstanding the fact that, for the most part, individual states in the Indo-Pacific seek to steer clear of these entanglements and to maintain good relations with all relevant actors.

Although its immediate impact on the Indo-Pacific region has been limited, the Russia–Ukraine war is widely perceived as a watershed moment, whereby the world order is being restructured and rearranged—a step beyond the prevalent liberal order and the West's hegemonic position. A single dominant pattern of order is difficult to identify, and scholars have therefore referred to a multi-order or multiplex system in which authority is more and more dispersed, if not fragmented (Acharya 2017; Flockart and Korosteleva 2022). The global order is characterised by fluid allegiances and blocs. There are numerous camps competing for power, with nations exhibiting flexible alignment choices. It should not be surprising to see major/great powers and regional powers occasionally sitting on the fence and/or occasionally standing on both sides of it (Stephens 2022). This is also the case with countries in the Indo-Pacific, as highlighted by the articles in the special issue. For instance, India under its multi-alignment doctrine is unwilling to side with the US on the Russia–Ukraine war. However, at the same time, it is a part of the Quad comprising the US, Japan, and Australia. Even with respect to the Quad, India is unwilling to frame the Quad and allow the group to emerge as a military alliance, and unlike the other three Quad partners, it is unwilling to engage in an overt containment strategy against China.

Overall, the fallout of the Russia–Ukraine war appears to have resulted in a strengthening of certain bilateral ties in the Indo-Pacific. In particular, it has strengthened existing bilateral strategic and alliance ties with the US (some of which had been waning in recent years), as governments in the region have intently observed how willing and able Washington has been to confront Russia's (and, by extension, China's) aggressive revisionism across multiple theatres. Conversely, most of the contributors to this special issue have not observed a strong

impulse to deepen and extend strategic cooperation through existing multilateral and minilateral frameworks and institutions, let alone to conclude new formal alliances.

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